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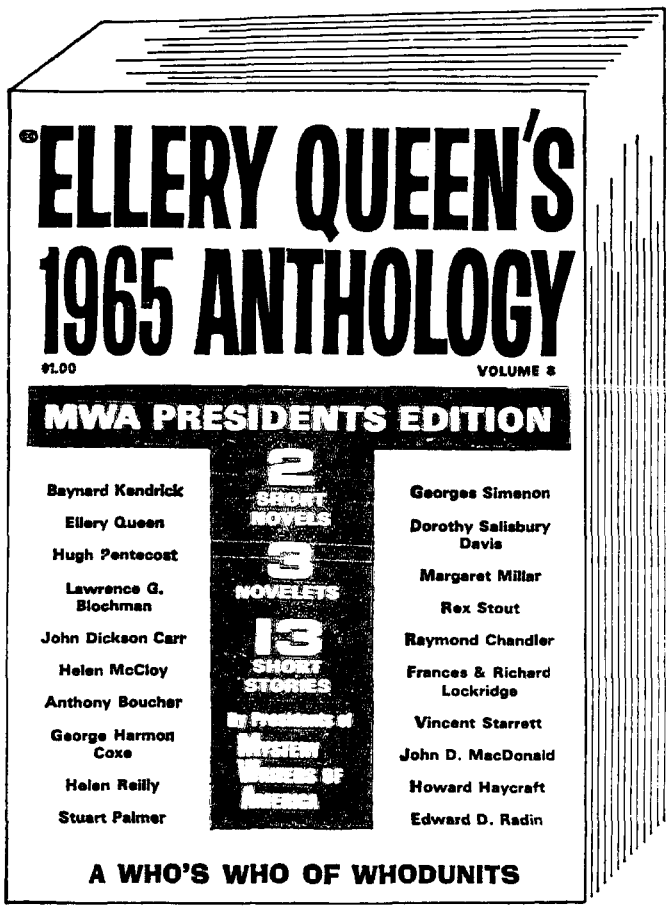

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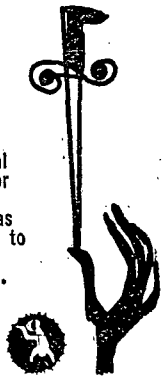

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a new story by

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG**
TITLE:	***The Case for Miss Peacock***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	The man in the brown suit
LOCALE:	California
COMMENTS:	*One of Charlotte Armstrong's warmest and most unusual stories . . . about Miss Mary Peacock, retired librarian, who suddenly found herself alone, frighteningly alone, in the heart of a big city . . .*

MISS MARY PEACOCK, WEARING her old black coat over her second-best blue dress, and holding her purse very tightly, looked forward to a pleasant afternoon. To be walking in the February sunshine with her white head bare, to be looking into the shop windows with a delicious sense of power, was most delightful.

A tall form came up behind her on the right and did not pass. Another tall form loomed on her left. "Ma'am?" Miss Peacock's feet faltered, her heart jumped. They were uniformed policemen.

"What? What is it?" she gasped.

"Wonder if you'd mind coming back with us a little way? A couple of questions?" The voice was in no way cross, but it wasn't going to take "no" for an answer.

"But . . . if you please? I don't understand."

"Help us out. A police matter." The voice wasn't telling much; it wasn't pleading, either.

"Well, certainly, if I—if I can." She was bewildered, but since they were policemen, she told herself that there was no need to be frightened.

Miss Peacock let them turn her about and all three walked in a moving spotlight of curious glances. She was glad to think that she need not feel mortified. Nobody knew her. She knew nobody. Between the tall men, Miss Peacock tried to

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lengthen and hurry her stride; when at last they took her into a doorway, she was out of breath.

The place was a lingerie shop—just a slot, long and narrow, with one aisle, one counter, and one wall of shelving. On a stool, deep inside, sat a woman. Another policeman leaned beside her. The woman lifted a mass of improbable red hair, and from her painted face a pair of angry brown eyes inspected Miss Peacock.

Almost at once the woman cried out, in a hoarse and furious voice, "That's her! That's the dirty old birdy! You got her!"

Miss Peacock staggered. Then a man in a brown suit whirled in from the street, nodded to all the policemen, and said cheerfully, "Miller's my name. Detective. Now, what's all this?"

"I'll tell you," The redhead's furious voice gained still more volume and her hands and shoulders began to move dramatically. "I'm Naomi Nelson and this is my shop. So I get here to open up, first thing this morning, and here's this old birdy waiting to get in. I'm not open yet, see. It's not nine o'clock. But I got a kind heart. Yah. No sooner do we get in the door, she pulls this gun on me. Look at her! You wouldn't believe it."

"Gun?" said the man in the brown suit.

"We found a gun," said one of the policemen, "in the trash can on the corner. Pair of gray silk gloves, also."

"That's right," cried Naomi, "gloves and all. A real pro, that's Grandma here. Right away she backs me into the stockroom, behind the curtain. Listen, I *mean!* First thing in the morning? I'm scared about green. I fainted dead away. When I come to, I'm on the floor of the stockroom, and has she got me tied up, but good! Pair of panties stuffed in my mouth. Ugh! Stocking around my jaw. See the marks? Hands and feet. Look at my wrists. I'm a nervous wreck. And talk about gall! All I got on me, see, is the change for the register. So what does Grandma do? She takes over, that's what she does, and all morning, I'm telling you, I'm lying in there and she's waiting on my customers and taking in the money. On top of this, she's got the air-conditioner running for the noise, so nobody can hear me trying to moan and groan. I coulda passed out for good, you know?"

The man in the brown suit said, "How did you get free, Miss?"

"Well, see, I always get a lunch-hour rush and then it dies down. Real down. So about a quarter of one, it must have been, some man comes in and starts calling, 'Hello. Hello.' So I know she's gone and I bang around in there and he finds me. She's gone all right, but she didn't get far. I got to hand it to you cops. You're good, I'll say that. You got her. That's her, all right. Hiya,

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Grandma," said Naomi viciously.

Everyone in the shop now looked at Miss Peacock. She said, "I don't know anything about this. I've never seen this—this young woman. I've never been in here before."

"Hah *hah*," Naomi let out a theatrical laugh.

"Can you identify yourself, Ma'am?" asked the man in the brown suit.

"I am Mary Peacock. Miss Peacock. I don't quite . . . Beyond stating who I am, how can I identify . . .?"

"A driver's license?"

"I don't have one. But I do have a l-library card." Miss Peacock was rummaging hopefully in her purse. "They may know me there. I have a bankbook, of course, but not with me. There is my landlord. I am rather at a loss," said Miss Peacock, not without spirit. "This woman is simply mistaken."

"I'd know her in hell," said Naomi passionately.

The man in the brown suit moved between them and asked Miss Peacock to empty her purse on the counter. So she plucked out her clean handkerchief, scented from her sachet, her compact and her lipstick. She took out her coin purse, billfold. The coins were heavy. The bills were a five and a one. She showed her library card. Her fingers found the pearl-handled pocketknife that she always carried. One of her brothers—all dead now, all gone—had given it to her sixty years ago. Then a small salt cellar, only an inch or so high, with a shaker top. A small packet of cleansing tissue. A roll of mints for the breath. The Order of Worship from last Sunday's service. A small circle of wire strung with little brass safety pins. Then, and finally, a folded wad of paper money, from the side pocket.

"Hah *hah*," cried Naomi, who was breathing on the man's neck. "There it is. That's my money."

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Peacock. "This is my money."

"Why is it separate?" the man in the brown suit wanted to know.

Miss Peacock, who was trembling, steadied herself. "I manage on a budget quite—quite well. Whenever, in any given week, there is something left over, I put it aside. There are forty-one dollars in bills. I have it with me because I had intended to buy a new coat today."

Then the redhead seemed to be shouting scorn, and the men began to confer; the place was noisy, crowded, stifling. People were peering in from the sidewalk. Miss Peacock felt as if she had fallen into a whirlpool. She began to put her things back into her purse, desperately clinging to this much order.

Then, at last, she was breathing cooler air. The man in the brown suit was helping her into his car. The staring faces frightened her. But when the car was moving, she pulled her wits together and said,

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"What is going to happen, now, please?"

The man said, "They'll take Miss Nelson to the police station and have her statement typed up. They'll also hunt around for some customer who was in there, this morning, and might have seen you. The girl can't give us any names. She couldn't see."

"And what are you doing with me, in the meantime?"

"I'm checking your alibi." She did not reply and in a moment he said, "Do you understand what I mean, Ma'am?"

Miss Peacock understood only too well. "Sir," she said, "I have no alibi. I came to California two months ago, from Philadelphia, where I have lived all my life. I am a librarian, retired. During the last few winters I've been having an annual bout with the flu, and there is no one to take care of me. So I came out here for the climate. I live alone. I have no relatives, no friends, or even acquaintances, anywhere near. No one will have noticed me, during this morning or any other."

"You are not exactly invisible, Miss Peacock," he said sharply.

"I may as well be."

"You can remember what you did this morning?"

"Of course. But I cannot prove it. And you can't, either."

"We'll see," he said.

He stopped the car at her apartment building. Miss Peacock's hand was not steady with the key in the lock on the second floor, but she finally managed. The man in the brown suit looked around her bed-sitting room, furnished, into her tiny kitchenette, the bathroom, the single closet.

"It is old," said Miss Peacock, "but the paint is fresh, and the rent is moderate. It suits me."

He said, "Okay. Start at the beginning. This morning?"

"I awoke," she said, a bit childishly.

He was unperturbed. "When?"

"I really can't tell you. I try, these days, to sleep as late as I can." She nibbled on her dry lips. "First, I put the coffee on. Then I took a shower. Then I made the bed and prepared my breakfast, and ate it. I was quite alone, of course."

"Did you open your door for any reason at all?"

"Why, to bring in my quart of milk. But there was no one in the hall. I saw nobody, and nobody saw me."

"Go on."

"Then I tidied up the kitchen. I washed out some things. I took them up to the roof to hang in the air. But there was nobody on the roof. I was not seen."

"What time was this?"

"About ten, I should say. I returned and attended to my plants. I nipped off the dying leaves and I turned them."

The man in the brown suit stepped to her window sill and in-

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spected her three plants. A sweet potato, in water, which was sprouting nicely. One African violet, on the shady end. A geranium slip she had started in a can, a gawky thing that leaned away from the light.

"I see they have been turned," he said.

"And I could have done that yesterday," said Miss Peacock tartly.

He glanced at her. He moved to finger the four library books on the table. "Murder mysteries? A librarian?"

"We are human," said Miss Peacock. "I enjoy them."

"All right," he said meekly. "Go on, please,"

"I have a lamb chop for my dinner. Nevertheless, I planned to go to the supermarket and buy some food for lunch, to eat in the park. The sun is so very nice in the middle of the day. I sit near the drinking fountain. I know it is rather a gypsy thing to do . . ."

The man said, "And then?" He looked as if he were struggling not to smile, or scowl.

"I sat there for some time, contemplating my purchase, you know. Anticipation is so great a part of one's pleasure. At last, I walked over to the shopping street. And you," said Miss Peacock abruptly, "know the rest." She sat down suddenly, feeling rather exhausted.

"How much is your income, may I ask?"

She told him. It was very small. "I can manage," she insisted. "I am frugal. As a matter of fact, I enjoy the effort and all the little victories." Miss Peacock was not sure about the expression on his face, whether it was doubt or pity, but she hadn't asked for pity. "I suppose my life has become very much constricted, very narrow, as most lives do when they are drawing towards an end. That is not to say I don't appreciate every drop of it."

"I see," he said in an odd way.

"You must also see," said Miss Peacock spunkily, "that I am right. I have no alibi. It is hopeless to try to prove anything that I have told you."

"I don't know about that," he said, "since I haven't tried, yet."

The woman who answered the neighboring door was stout and fresh of face. The man in the brown suit was well-spoken and respectful. Mrs. Bradley was perfectly willing to answer his questions. "Well, no, I didn't see her, not this morning. Miss Peacock, did you say? How ja do?"

"How do you do?" said Miss Peacock with numb lips.

"But I heard her in her shower, I know that, if it helps any."

"At what time, Ma'am?"

"Well, I couldn't say exactly. I was rushing around, myself. Before eight thirty, that's for sure. I had to go out, then."

"Did you see a bottle of milk at her door?"

"Any time I get out of this place

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that early, I'm still blind as a bat. I guess I didn't notice."

"Then you can't give an exact time when you were sure that Miss Peacock was in her apartment? Were you sure, by the way, that it was she?"

"Why, sure, I'm sure. She sings. In the shower. 'Ancient of Days' and like that. These walls . . ."

Miss Peacock spoke painfully, "I am very sorry. I had no idea."

"Oh, no, now, listen," said Mrs. Bradley, "don't stop. I like to hear the old hymns. They take me back. Don't stop. Gee, I'm sorry." Mrs. Bradley's round face took on the pout of a deprived child.

Marveling a little, Miss Peacock let the man in the brown suit lead her up two flights to the roof. There was another tenant up there, a youngish woman, struggling with some slippery pink garments, some clothespins, and her basket.

Her name was Mrs. Terry Payne, she told the man, and no, she had not met Miss Peacock before. Oh, she had seen her, but not this morning. "Only thing I can say," said Mrs. Terry Payne, "she must have hung out her things after nine forty-five. 'Cause that's when I hung out mine, and hers weren't up here, then."

"You recognize her things, then, do you?"

"Oh, sure," said Mrs. Payne. "Listen, I've noticed them before. See, I'm a slob," she said candidly. "Always wish I wouldn't fall for so many bargains and end up with such junk. Look at her underwear."

Miss Peacock stood on the roof, not knowing whether to be mortified or not.

"Real dainty," said Mrs. Payne. "Quality. The kind to last. Oh, well, I got no sense, really." She sighed. "If that's all . . .?" She left them.

The man in the brown suit asked Miss Peacock politely if she would care to take her things down to her apartment, now that they were dry, and freshen up, perhaps? He would meet her in the lobby. Miss Peacock did all this, thinking hard.

Afterwards, coming down the one flight, she could hear her landlord speaking.

"Minds her business. No complaints. No trouble. And I'll tell you something else. Pays her rent smack on the first day of the month. I'm sorry I didn't happen to see her this morning. Oh, Miss Peacock. Listen, if there's anything I can do . . ."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Gould," said Miss Peacock. "But I am in this gentleman's very competent hands."

The gentleman in the brown suit said sternly, "What about mail?" He was looking at the row of brass boxes.

"I receive very little personal mail," said Miss Peacock, "and none this morning. There was a circular, addressed to Occupant. I threw it in a trash basket on the way

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to the supermarket. Proving nothing."

"True," he said ruefully. He led her out of the building. "Which way to the supermarket?"

As they walked together down the familiar blocks, she said, "Even a thief, I presume, might take a shower. As for my wash, how can you prove *I* hung it there?"

"I can't," he said carelessly, watching on all sides. He stopped at the corner gas station. "Do you know this lady?" he asked the man at the pump.

"Well, I've seen her," said the gas-station man, nodding to Miss Peacock cordially. "I guess she's a neighbor. Right? She goes by, pretty near every day."

"Did you see her go by this morning?"

"Huh?" The gas-station man wanted to know why he was asked and when he found out that it was police business he became very cautious. "I'd say I probably did. But I can't swear to it. Too easy to get mixed up, when you're busy, like I am. Sorry, Ma'am."

"It's quite proper to be careful." said Miss Peacock amiably.

The gas-station attendant turned and said to the detective, "Gee, I wish I *could* swear. I've got two girls at home. Seems to me I spend half my life trying to get them to stand up straight. I keep telling them, 'look at the actresses.' I keep telling them, it's not only healthier, it's prettier. Every time I see this lady walking by, I think of how I wish I could get it through their heads, so they'll walk like her, some day."

His face was red with the embarrassment of being so open and personal. He nodded and stepped backward to his duties.

Miss Peacock and the detective walked on. Her back was straight and her feet were light.

It was a huge market. The girl at the proper checkout stand was wearing her blonde hair in an enormous pouf. Under it, her face looked pinched and small and shrewd.

The man in the brown suit spoke his piece and the girl said, "Yeah. What I mean, I've seen her, lots of times. Um, boy," said the girl, "and many is the time I wish I could belt some of these people a good one in their jaw. *She's* a lady. I notice that."

"Oh?"

"Listen, what I mean, she don't buy much, but she waits her turn. And some of these big fat mamas, with two carts-full of stuff to check out, they haven't got the kindness to step aside and let her through." The girl wiggled and scratched her scalp with a pencil. "Burns me up," she said.

"Did you see her in here this morning, Miss?"

"I dunno," said the girl. "*Was* you in here?"

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Miss Peacock nodded before the detective could stop her.

"Sure I saw her," said the check girl loudly, looking very wide-eyed and exactly like a liar.

"At what time?"

"This morning." The girl shrugged

"What did she buy?"

The girl's lashes quivered. "A Spanish onion," she said loudly, and her eyes slid to Miss Peacock, to see whether she had guessed correctly. A look of delighted mischief came into her face, but she suppressed it immediately. "Listen," she said, all innocence, "how I remember. One time I says to her, 'What do you do with all those onions?' I says to her. I'm kidding, see. She buys one at a time. Well, she tells me she eats them raw in a sandwich because they're healthy. So I remember. Right?"

Miss Peacock swallowed. "Yes, I too remember that conversation. But it was several weeks ago." She smiled at the girl.

"And she *looks* healthy," the girl burst out. "A lot of old people are creeps, you know? But not her. *I'll* swear," she said.

The man thanked her gravely and led Miss Peacock away. She met his eye and had to smile. "Not a good witness," she pronounced. "She was obviously guessing."

"Did she guess right?"

"As a matter of fact, she did. I bought two rolls, one small tomato, and a medium-sized Spanish onion. I have my little knife. You saw it. And a little salt. I made myself the sandwiches in the park."

He goggled at her. "Somebody ought to remember *that*," he said.

"I doubt it," said Miss Peacock gently.

They walked on to the little square park and the man looked about at the grass, the trees, the drinking fountain. "See anybody who was here this morning?"

Miss Peacock sank down on her accustomed bench. "Yes, I think so," she said in a moment. "Two of the children. That little girl in blue, and the one in green."

The man in the brown suit walked away. He had no sooner squatted down to speak to the little girls when a young woman came hurrying out of a house, opposite, and across the grass.

Miss Peacock watched, almost dreamily. The detective evidently made his routine speech. The young woman, at first hostile, began to speak in her turn. Suddenly she lifted her arm and hailed another young woman who was just parking a car. This one came to them. The children, meantime, ran off to play. Soon the two young women and the man in the brown suit came drifting into Miss Peacok's range of hearing.

"You have kids, you keep an eye on who is in the park, believe me," said the first woman. "Yes, I've seen her. Not this morning, though. I don't say she *wasn't* here. But I

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had an appointment at the beauty parlor and it's a scramble. Sally was going to watch the kids. When I got home I gave them lunch and then kept an eye on them while Sally went to the dentist. We kind of spell each other on a school holiday."

"That's right," said the other one, whose face had a lopsided, novocained look. "She might have been here when I took off. I wouldn't want to say for sure. How about the kids? What do they say?"

"They are willing to say she was or she wasn't," said the man, "depending on what they think's wanted. How old are they?"

"Seven," chimed their mothers, in twin voices of despair.

"But neither of you," said the man, rather anxiously, "noticed her making and eating her lunch, there on that bench today?"

The two shook their heads. The one with the new hairdo said impulsively, "I know you can't tell by looks, but I've always kind of liked her looks. For what it's worth."

The one with the novocaine said, "Me, too. I've got no intention of growing old, mind, but if I ever do . . ." They both peered around him at Miss Peacock.

Miss Peacock was sitting there, erect, as was her habit. The sun was lowering, and did not give much warmth. But she felt warm and extraordinarily comfortable. Although this was the end of the quest, she still had no alibi, she was in the hands of the police, and the victim of a crime was insisting that she was a criminal. How odd, she thought. How very strange.

"Come on," begged the novocained woman, "She didn't really do it, did she? I don't want to believe that."

Then the hairdo woman snapped her fingers. She had thought of something. "Lunch," she cried. "Don't tell me anything. Let me tell you. When I called the kids in I asked them what they'd like. Okay. They absolutely had to have a roll sandwich with tomato and some raw onion."

"What?" shrieked the novocained one. "You didn't give it to them, Barbie?"

"I sure did," said Barbie, the hairdo. "Why not? I didn't have any rolls, of course, but I sold them on plain bread. Well?" She looked at the man. "Where did they get the idea?"

"That's what she had," he admitted.

"There you are, then," said hairdo, with satisfaction.

The detective thanked them and dismissed them. They went drifting toward their children to gather them in. They kept looking back, and smiling.

The man in the brown suit came to Miss Peacock. He was not smiling. Would she mind waiting where she was while he fetched the car? Miss Peacock did not mind.

When he came back, very shortly, he put her into the seat in his polite

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way. Miss Peacock said, "It occurs to me that I have been trusted."

"You wouldn't have gotten far," he said absent-mindedly.

"It's no alibi, of course," she said cheerily. "The children may have seen me prepare just such a sandwich on another day. It's tenous. It's only a presumption."

"True," he said, looking straight ahead.

"Are you—taking me in?"

"Yes, I am." The man in the brown suit sighed.

Miss Peacock sighed too, quite happily.

At the police station they came into a room where a man in a blue suit was seated at a desk talking with a woman who was dressed in a pink nylon uniform and a white sweater.

"This is Mrs. Norwood," the man in the blue suit said. "She works in the bakery a couple of doors away from the lingerie shop. She bought a slip in there this morning."

"Mrs. Norwood, have you ever seen this lady before?" asked Miss Peacock's man. He seemed to be presenting her.

Mrs. Norwood squinted through already squinty eyes. "I don't know—not really. I just don't remember." She was nervous and anxious.

"Can you say this is *not* the woman who waited on you?"

"Well, I can't say *that*." The pink woman twisted her hands. "I wasn't looking at *her* so much. I was looking at the merchandise. I just know she wasn't young."

The man in the brown suit was feeling exasperated. Miss Peacock could sense that. So she put her hands on the desk, leaned over toward the pink woman, and asked, "Do you recognize my voice, then?"

The woman said, "No. No. But I got no ear, honest. I just can't say, not one way or the other. I can't help it."

"Of course not," said Miss Peacock comfortingly.

The man in the blue suit cleared his throat and looked at the man in the brown suit, who rolled his eyes. But Miss Peacock was imagining. "You were looking at the merchandise," she said, "naturally. Then you must have seen the hands of the person who served you. Were they gloved?"

"Gloved! For heaven's sakes, I'd have noticed a thing like that." Mrs. Norwood looked down at Miss Peacock's hands. Well," she proclaimed, suddenly radiant and decisive, "I can't swear as to who it *was*, but I'll tell you it wasn't *this* lady."

"How is that?" demanded the man in the brown suit.

"Because I saw her fingernails chewed down about as far as they could go. And look!"

Miss Peacock's nails were discreetly a medium length, immaculate, softly aglow with a colorless polish.

The man in the blue suit said, more or less *sotto voce*, "By the way,

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we got a line on the gun. M.O. paid off, too. Same thing, over in Glendale. There's a suspect."

"Be with you as soon as I take Miss Peacock home."

In the car Miss Peacock said, "Of course, it is only the word of Mrs. Norwood against a positive identification."

The detective grunted.

"And it is the truth, is it not, that you still cannot prove that I was anywhere else this morning but in that shop?"

"That's right," he said grumpily.

"It would be up to a jury . . ." she began.

Then he burst out. "There'll be no jury. You read too many mystery stories. I know."

"But—"

"It adds up. There's such a thing as character. As reputation. *I know*, I tell you. You didn't do it. So will you please . . ." Then he muttered, "Excuse me."

Miss Peacock became demurely silent. He handed her out of the car and said contritely, "I want to apologize, Miss Peacock, if I was a little bit annoyed. And I apologize for all this trouble."

"Oh, no," cried Miss Peacock. "Please don't apologize for one moment. I've had a perfectly marvelous afternoon."

She held out her hand. He bowed so low that he just missed kissing her dainty fingertips.

Miss Mary Peacock withdrew graciously, and walked, like a queen, into her castle, in a city where she was better than visible—she had been seen through.

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Don Juan led a charmed life (in more ways than one), but he could not hope to get away with it indefinitely . . . a witty (and naughty) story of what happened to Don Juan's "farewell souvenirs"—The Seven Coquauvin Tears—a tale full of various crimes, from blackmail to murder, and varied detection (keep your eye on her ladyship), in a story with so many twists and turns and new developments that it could easily have been the plot of a complete novelet . . .

MY LADIES' TEARS

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

"SO POSITIVELY, MY DARLING," said Don Juan, "this is the last embrace." He bestowed it languidly. "Tomorrow the announcement of my betrothal goes out to every newspaper in Paris."

"I shall kill myself," she said.

"They all say that," said Don Juan. "My whole day has been a nightmare of threatened suicides." He handed her a tiny ornamental pistol from the table beside the couch. "Take this—it may assist you. A memento."

"A dangerous one?" she suggested —dangerously.

"Ah, danger! The spice of life. Why else have I lived with a gun always close to my hand? But alas, those days are over—the jealous husbands enraged, the lovely ladies outraged. Or nearly over," he added laughing. Then he brushed the pistol aside with his left hand, to point elsewhere than at his heart, and with his right hand fumbled beneath a cushion. "Come, here is something to avert, let us hope, my last threat of peril."

It was a jeweler's box, its inner velvet raised to take a necklace, with indentations for seven hanging drops; in the box, however, there was only a single diamond. "A family heirloom," he said. "The Coquauvin 'Collar of Tears'. The pendant, you see, is shaped like a falling tear."

And Don Juan lifted out the single diamond, tossed aside the empty box, placed the jewel in the palm of her left hand, and folded his fingers over it with a kind little pat. "For you," he said. "A souvenir."

She sat still and cold, looking down at the diamond drop in her hand. "And the other six?"

"Dispersed," he said. "In the course of this one melancholy day —dispersed. Souvenirs of the kindnesses of my bachelor years."

"And the collar itself?"

"Ah, the collar . . ." He shrugged apologetically. "I will be

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frank with you, my dear. I had reserved the collar for you—I knew that for you no 'tears' would be necessary; you alone would truly shed them. But—well, a lovely creature was importunate; she asked for it so prettily that . . ." He shrugged again. "And so she has just departed—and with her the collar." He added, smiling reminiscently, that he had to admit that, of them all, she had certainly deserved collar.

"She who 'deserved it' has the collar. And I—*I!*—a single stone?"

"You and half a dozen others, and none of *them* has made any complaint. And no one can say," Don Juan added complacently, "that I have not shed tears at parting. Seven lovely ladies—seven diamond tears."

"You have a heart of stone," she said. "No wonder you should also shed tears of stone."

And she opened her fingers and looked down at the diamond, lying like a tiny pool of sorrow in the palm of her left hand. Then she lifted her right hand, leveled the little gun, and this time she pulled the trigger.

"Show Madame la Marquise to my boudoir," said Madame la Duchesse de Marlaine. She gave a small elegant wriggle to adjust the bustle of her dress, glanced in a looking glass to see that her rouge was not too evident, and assumed a welcoming smile. "Celestine, how charming! But, my dear, why so pale?"

"Nonsense, Marguerite, I am no paler than usual." Madame la Marquise forced herself to a gossipy tone. "I only dropped in to ask you—have you heard the news?"

"The news?" said the Duchess.

"Don Juan is dead."

"Le Vicomte Coquauvin? Yes, I had heard. I have, in fact, sent out the children's governess to gather further details. Is it true he was murdered?"

"Shot through the heart, they say."

"That must have taken some locating," said the Duchess dryly.

"Then you knew him, Marguerite?"

"I knew his reputation. And the Duke, when he was alive, was acquainted with him—le Vicomte has dined here. But not, of course, since . . . A woman, so recently a widow, has to be careful."

"Especially a young, rich, and beautiful widow," said Madame la Marquise.

"Almost as careful as a young, rich, and beautiful wife," agreed the Duchess. She added, "Is it true that you've been trying to buy a diamond from Solange Vivante? Her maid told my governess—"

Madame la Marquise became even paler than before. "That governess of yours, Marguerite! No gossip escapes her."

"An invaluable creature," said the Duchess. "But alas, she will be

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leaving me soon—she is going to be married. Her young man is even now in Paris, from England, waiting to take her away. Meanwhile, however, my dear—about Solange Vivante?"

"Well, yes, Marguerite, it's true that she has this single stone—a diamond drop, shaped like a tear. I happen to have one very much like it—"

"Have you indeed?" said the Duchess.

"—and I thought they would make a nice pair . . ."

"I had no idea," said the Duchess, "that Solange possessed such a gem. She showed it to you?"

"Not exactly showed it. I—I dropped round to see her, to discuss the murder, just as I've dropped in upon you, Marguerite; and by the purest chance—only Solange, of course, won't believe me!—I went into her dressing room to borrow a handkerchief and just happened to notice this diamond—"

"If people will keep their jewels in their handkerchief drawers," agreed the Duchess, "they simply ask to be discovered." She inquired before the other could comment, "And were you successful?"

"Successful, Marguerite?"

"In borrowing a handkerchief, my dear." The Duchess flung out a hand toward her own bedroom. "If you want one of mine, by all means help yourself." She added, "Alas, you will find no diamond 'tear,' and, in fact, since they seem of a sudden to be all the rage, I begin to covet one. I suppose, as you were not able to make up the pair, you wouldn't sell me yours?"

"Sell mine? Marguerite, I could not dream of it! You will understand," said Madame la Marquise uneasily, "a family jewel . . ."

"Oh, I understand—perfectly," said the Duchess. "But then—of what family?"

At this moment the Duchess' governess, Mademoiselle Brune, returned and now presented herself before their ladyships, face blanched, eyes popping.

"Compose yourself, girl," said the Duchess sternly, "you look like a demented hare. What is all this excitement?"

"Oh, Madame la Duchesse, please excuse me, but after all it *is* exciting! Everyone is talking about it. And having met him here, here in this very house—"

"Having gaped at him one day, Mademoiselle, in the hall as the manservant showed him out—"

"Having seen him at any rate, Madame, with my own eyes—"

But Madame la Marquise could contain her impatience no longer. "Come, Mademoiselle!—what news?"

"He was found by his valet this morning, my lady. He had dismissed the man for the whole day, said he would be—entertaining. Entertaining several ladies, he said, and for the last time. And he kissed his fingers and blew the kiss into

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the air—many kisses; and then he laughed . . ."

"Very well," said the Duchess, but her mouth was stiff. "So it *was* 'for the last time.' What else?"

"And so he was found, my lady. He was lying on the couch in the big salon—the couch where—where they say he . . ." She broke off in confusion. "There was a jewel box beside him, empty. The valet says it was one that held a necklance—a diamond collar with seven large diamond drops."

"And so?" said the Duchess, not looking at Madame la Marquise.

"Well, and so, Madame, Don Juan was dead. He may have died at any time—no one admits to having seen him after the valet was dismissed about midday. He had been shot many times, but the first shot had killed him."

"With what weapon?"

"With his own, Madame, or so they suppose—it is missing from his room. A small pearl-handled pistol. He kept it always on the table beside the couch."

"It wasn't there last night," said the Duchess, and broke off quickly; her hand clapped to her mouth, and she was staring wide-eyed at Madame la Marquise.

"Yes, it was," said Madame la Marquise before she too could stop herself, and clapped her hand to her mouth and also stood staring back.

"Goodness!" exclaimed the little governess—and stood staring at both of them . . .

For a few moments Madame la Marquise could not imagine who Mademoiselle Brune might be; nor why—for she proved to be Madame la Duchesse de Marlaine's governess—such a person should want to see her.

Mademoiselle Brune soon enlightened her. "I came to make my adieux, Madame."

Well, really! "You are leaving Paris?" said Madame la Marquise coldly. One could only trust that the Duchess' chef and femmes de chambre were not departing also—would they too make a round of farewells to her ladyship's friends?

"For England, Madame. I am going to be married."

"I trust you will be very happy," said Madame la Marquise—without enthusiasm; however. To be happily married, let alone living in wedlock in England, must surely be a contradiction in terms.

Mademoiselle Brune was more sanguine. But . . . It was all so much a matter of money nowadays. Her Englishman's family were inquiring about her dowry. Life as a nursery governess had not been very rewarding . . .

"No doubt, Mademoiselle. But what has this to do with me?"

Once again Mademoiselle Brune enlightened Madame la Marquise. A little—shall we say, collection?—among the Duchess' friends. Already for example, Mademoiselle Solange Vivante had been most kind . . .

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The tear-shaped diamond reached the Duchess that evening, by hand, with a request for its price by return. Madame la Marquise found herself suddenly in urgent need of money —and did not care, apparently, to approach her husband for it.

The Duchess put the diamond away—though not in her handkerchief drawer—and sat for a long time deep in thought. Then she sent for her governess. "So, Mademoiselle, before your departure to England—a little blackmail?"

"Madame will not give me away," said the governess. It was not a question.

"Of course not," said the Duchess. She looked Mademoiselle Brune in the eyes. "After all, I have the diamond—two diamonds, in fact, for I have already been approached by Mademoiselle Vivante."

"At my suggestion," said the governess. She looked back, just as squarely, at her ladyship. "One hears that Clara Malheure, the opera singer, was wearing a new diamond during the first act tonight. And she was—they say also—a friend of le Vicomte Coquauvin."

"With what wings," said the Duchess, "does an item of gossip fly to those little pink ears of yours!" And she rang for her maid. "My cloak and a veil. I am going to the Opera for the last act. Tell the nurse to take over the children—Mademoiselle Brune will accompany me."

Madame Clara's role seemed hardly so exacting as to account for her prostration, in tears, on the couch in her dressing room. Astonishment revived her, however, when Madame la Duchesse de Marlaine was announced. "Madame! An honor!"

"I will keep you only a moment, Madame. I came merely to ask you about the diamond you wore tonight. I wonder, is it by any chance for sale?"

"For sale?" cried Madame Clara, outraged. "For sale? This diamond, Madame, was given me by a friend. A friend who is now—who is now dead, Madame."

"And murdered at that?" murmured the Duchess sympathetically.

"Very well, le Vicomte Coquauvin—I make no secret of it. He gave it to me—I forget just when," said Madame Clara casually. "Sometime last week. I never saw him again, and I am desolated!"

"At any rate, Madame, the diamond pendant is not for sale?"

Madame Clara looked round the shoddy dressing room and a gleam of longing lit her red-rimmed eyes. But she put her hand to her throat and held on to the diamond tightly. "No, it is not for sale."

The Duchess bowed to necessity. She rose. "A tragic business. His own pistol too, one hears."

"He kept it always on the table by his couch," ventured Mademoiselle Brune.

"It wasn't there last night," said the Duchess. She clapped her hand

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to her mouth and stared and waited.

Madame Clara did not fail her. "Yes, it was," she said; and, stricken, stared back.

The governess did not immediately follow her lady from the dressing room. A modest compliment on Madame's performance, a diffident hope that in the near future more prominent roles might reward so remarkable a talent—Madame Clara ground her fine teeth behind lips forced to complaisant smiling—then a respectful farewell. Mademoiselle Brune was departing for England. Madame Clara trusted Mademoiselle would be happy and waited with unconcealed impatience for her to go.

What a gaffe, blurting it out before she could stop herself!—that it had been last night that she was there, the very night of his murder. How fortunate that neither of them —the Duchess or the governess— had apparently noticed its significance!

"Well, Mademoiselle, I will not keep you. Good wishes for your happiness."

Alas, said Mademoiselle Brune, that one's happiness these days should depend so much upon material things. The English were scornful of a poor governess's dowry . . .

Madame Clara's diamond reached the Duchess by hand the next evening, as she sat among the ormolu and Sèvres in her exquisite salon, entertaining her cousin, la Princesse Charitée de Blanc. "A jewel I bought from some second-rate little singer. Poor Coquauvin left it to her—or so she says. What a shocking thing that was! With his own weapon too, I am told."

The Duchess' children were present in their best bibs and tuckers to pay their respects to their Cousin Charitée and to accept a bedtime bonbon; Mademoiselle Brune was, of course, in attendance. And Mademoiselle Brune in the excitement of the moment quite lost her head, and forgetting whose august presence she was in, burst out, "They say it always lay on the table beside his couch."

"It wasn't there that night," said the Duchess.

"Wasn't it?" said the Princess.

"A dud?" signaled the governess to the Duchess from behind the Princess.

Or not? They discussed it that night. "You had better visit her just the same," said the Duchess, "she will not refuse to see you. She is known for her charity—so aptly named. Sound her out very carefully. If she has a diamond, she is bound to pay with it—she hasn't a sou these days, poor thing, and her family jewels were sold long ago . . ."

But the Princess had no diamond. She trembled, turned pale, hardly troubled to deny a past affair with the dead man, but allowed the governess to depart, unsatisfied. And the Duchess' dear friend, Madame

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Romain, proved a failure also, and one or two more; but la Vicomtesse Lachasse came across with no trouble at all, and la Comtesse du Jean and Madame de Gris.

And at last the day came when the Duchess could say, weighing the glittering hoard in a hand already heavy with rings, "That is the last. I now have them all—all seven of Don Juan's 'tears.' And you, Mademoiselle, you have half a dozen times their value in cash—a considerable dowry for a poor little nursery governess. You will be rich."

"I have earned it," said the governess, not without spirit.

"Oh, certainly, and I don't grudge it to you. All I wanted were the seven 'tears,' and no suspicion attaching to me of—"

"Blackmail," said the governess.

The Duchess stiffened a little. "That word on your lips, Mademoiselle, might well prove double-edged. And I see no cause for you to make yourself disagreeable. Our task is done, our partnership at an end. You have your money and may depart from the scene. And I have the seven diamond drops."

"And your revenge," said the governess.

Now the Duchess sat very stiff indeed—very still and remote. She said at last, with ice in her voice, "What do you mean?"

The little governess trembled, but she stuck to her guns. Greed had grown rampant in the heart, from the seeds which, but a brief few days before, a slip of the tongue had planted there.

"I mean," said Mademoiselle Brûne, "that you wanted the seven jewels, not for what they mean to you but for what they meant to *them*, to his other women. They dared to compete with you for his favors, but the prizes shall not remain in their hands. And since you have bought them without concealment—'unaware,' of course, of the reasons they were offered for sale!—you may now flaunt them round that white neck of yours for all to see."

The Duchess laughed—if you could call it laughing. "Are you suggesting that *I* was a mistress of le Vicomte Coquauvin?"

And the governess laughed also—if you could call it laughing. She mimicked: "It wasn't there last night," and clapped her hand to her mouth and stared in insolent imitation. "Poor fools!—so obsessed with their own slips that it never occurred to one of them to ask you, 'How do *you* know?' "

"The answer to that is simple: what I said was a trap."

"Not the first time," said the governess.

At this the Duchess really laughed. "My poor girl, you overreach yourself. I was not conducting an affair with Monsieur Coquauvin."

"Then where did you get the *seventh* diamond?" said the gover-

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ness; and she pointed to the seven glittering drops in the Duchess' hand. "Madame la Marquise, the opera singer, Mademoiselle Vivante, and Mesdames Lachasse, de Jean, and de Gris. Six ladies, Madame—six diamonds. Where did you get the seventh?"

Slowly the Duchess, with a white forefinger, segregated a single stone. "It is true that I came by one of these without your assistance."

"No doubt," said Mademoiselle, all irony.

"You have a vulgar mind," said the Duchess. "Well, that is your breeding, so you cannot help it. But you are also an obtuse young woman, and an inference which you have missed, my dear, I did not."

"At any rate," said the governess, holding out her hand, "I will have the stone—the seventh. This was a partnership—you to have the diamonds, I to have their price. Give it to me—and then, if you will, I will sell it back to you."

"But you still believe that it was given to me by him."

"If it was," said the governess quickly, "you need not pay me for it."

"Dear me," said the Duchess. "You can set your traps unaided, I see." She went to her desk. "Very well then—honor among thieves. I will give you the same amount I gave you for each of the other stones."

The governess accepted the money, stuffed it away in an inside skirt pocket with a big roll of banknotes, and tied it all with a blue ribbon.

"Now," said the Duchess. "The partnership is dissolved. You may depart."

"So I will," said the governess. "When I have the diamonds too."

In her right hand Mademoiselle Brune now held a tiny pearl-handled gun.

The Duchess stood stock-still. "What is this? Some threat?" Then she looked more closely. "Isn't that—?"

"Yes," said the governess. "The same gun—monogrammed with his initials. I found it in the secret drawer of your ladyship's desk."

"You just happened to be borrowing a handkerchief, no doubt?" said the Duchess, all irony.

"I just happened to be looking for the gun that killed Monsieur Coquauvin," said the governess.

"Well, and now you have found it," said the Duchess, "and have not the wit to realize that it is empty. Its venom is spent."

The governess glanced at the weapon in a hand which was now not quite steady. She said, "How do you know?"

"Who else should know?" said the Duchess, with a tinge of mockery.

The governess lowered her hand. "It makes no difference. I know what I know. I can still go to the police."

"Don't trouble," said the Duchess. "The police are coming to you."

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"To me?" Every vestige of color fled from the governess' face, and her greedy little hands were trembling. "The police . . . ?"

"I sent for them an hour ago," said the Duchess. She glanced at a clock on the high marble mantelpiece. "I told them to come—about now. I thought we might need them—after I had observed that the pistol was gone."

The Duchess looked at the pretty little gleaming thing, in its silver and mother of pearl. "You have not heard of this Monsieur Bertillon, my child? He is employing a new method of police procedure. They can read, from any shining object, who it was that last handled it. And you, we both know, are the last person to have handled le Vicomte Coquauvin's gun. For the rest . . ." She shrugged. "An employee in the house of la Duchesse de Marlaine—all preparations made to get out of the country—blackmail easily proved—"

The governess interrupted but the Duchess talked her resolutely down. "La Duchesse de Marlaine implicated? Ridiculous! Various ladies offered her diamonds, declaring themselves urgently in need of money; she naturally would not inquire into their reasons . . . Really!—what will the little governess think of next to try to wriggle out of trouble? And as to the motive—for you, Mademoiselle Brune, having murdered him . . ." Again the cold voice silenced an outcry of protest. "A meeting with Don Juan in the hall—here, as you yourself said before a witness the other day, here in this very house. But—I am only suggesting what the police will be told—you were not just walking across the hall; you were on your way out. He also; and as he turned away from the door, you followed him. For the rest, he was not very particular—all the world knows that; any trash in petticoats would do. How many times, I wonder, has the nurse been left in charge, while Mademoiselle Brune supposedly went off on a shopping expedition?—at which, I daresay, she sold rather more than she bought."

"You don't believe that?" cried the governess.

"Not a word of it, my dear. But the police will believe it. And as for taking money from him, you have taken it in worse circumstances by far—which money, by the way, you may as well hand back to me. I will see that it goes to a deserving charity." And the Duchess pulled the blubbering, frightened girl toward her, thrust a white hand into a bulging pocket, and removed the roll of banknotes. "There! Now we are even—you—and the rest of them, as you so perceptively surmise—and I."

And the Duchess released the governess, and gave her a thrust that sent her toppling and stumbling toward the door. "So get out, begone, quick before the police get here! And take this weapon with

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you—and drop it into the channel as you make what haste you may towards England and safety; and if you value your life, never let me set eyes upon you again."

The Duchess waited until the fleeing heels hammered across the marble floors, over the startled protests of a footman, and the front door slammed. Then she rang the bell. "Has the governess departed?"

"Rushed out of the house, my lady. But she has not taken her things."

"Have them bundled up and sent after her. Her fiancé is at an hotel somewhere—the nurse would know." As the man hesitated, she said, "Yes?"

"Are we to expect the police, my lady? The young woman said—"

"The police?" said the Duchess innocently. "No—*I* haven't sent for the police."

It was wonderful, she added to herself, what a guilty conscience could do . . .

The Princess de Blanc lived in a small house, furnished—shabbily these days—from ancient glories. Within an hour of the governess' departure the Duchess presented herself at the Princess' door.

"Charitée, my dear, you are not looking at all well—so taut and strained." A gloved hand opened and a diamond tear glittered in the palm. "Could it, perhaps, have something to do with this?"

The Princess drew back. "It is yours, is it not?" said the Duchess.

"Mine?"

"It had fallen upon the carpet, Charitée, beside the couch. It lay there—shining. It seemed to me," said the Duchess, staring down at it, "the only thing left alive in that room of death."

The Princess put her hands to her face, swaying. She cried out, "Marguerite! That night—you came back?"

"How could I 'come back'?" said the Duchess. "I had only just arrived. I came at midnight. We were—you may believe me or not—going innocently out to supper. You will have no trouble at all in believing that after all we did not go."

The Princess interrupted her, stammering. "The—the gun?"

"The gun was still lying on the table," said the Duchess, "and still warm to the touch. I brought it away with me, wrapped up in my handkerchief—you have heard of this Monsieur Bertillon and his 'fingerprints'?" She looked with pity at the shuddering woman before her. "Don't be afraid. Fingerprints and all, I have got rid of the gun."

But the Princess had pulled herself together a little. "Afraid? Why should I be afraid? What has all this to do with me? I do not deny—to you, Marguerite, at any rate—that he was my lover. But that does not mean I was with him that night. Let alone that I—"

"Hush, Charitée," said the Duch-

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ess. "You are safe, I tell you. Of course you were his mistress, and of course you were there that night—and of course you killed him. To each of his—women—he had given a souvenir, a diamond. You had no diamond. Therefore, you are the one who left the diamond behind." And she held it out again, the shining tear, lying in her palm.

But the Princess repudiated it, weeping. "Keep it, keep it! I know you have been buying up these stones. In return for . . ." And she put her two thin hands together, beseechingly.

The Duchess put the stone away carefully. Then she said, "The bribe is unnecessary." And she lifted her beautiful proud head and said, "He deserved to die."

"Marguerite! You, too, loved him? You too were—deceived?"

"I more than all," said the Duchess. "And so I have sought to discover—and to protect—his executioner. The empty jewel box, the single stone fallen there, the valet's story next day . . . Piece by piece, the necklace had been given away. So I set my traps . . ."

"With your accomplice," said the Princess, and her face grew hard again.

"Ah, my accomplice! But my accomplice, you will find, has made amends." She took out a large roll of bank notes, tied with a blue ribbon. "The young lady has left Paris, but her last words were an agreement with me that I should hand this to you."

"To me?"

"To you—actually, to you by name, Charitée." And over the other's protest the Duchess insisted, "Accept it. I assure you, if it is not yours, at least it is nobody else's. For my part, I have the seven tears and that is all I care for."

"And the Coquauvin Collar to go with them," said the Princess, her face grim again. "Which was to have come to me, but which you—'above all the rest' deserved." Two tears, as bright as the diamond, spilled over and crept down her face. "God knows, I wanted nothing from him—only his love. But to offer me a single jewel while another woman who had 'deserved it' more, had departed with the collar."

"Charitée," said the Duchess, "I took no collar. I came there *after* you, I tell you—at midnight, not before. Indeed, he'd made a point of my being exactly on time."

"He always made a point of it," said the Princess. "For the first time that evening I fully understood why—that I was not the only one." She began to weep again. "He told me to come at eleven, and to use the French window. Well, I did. But perhaps I was a little early—at any rate, it would have been like him to take the risk, to cut things fine. As I turned the corner he was handing you into his carriage. It was dark, yes, but in a ray from the carriage lamp, I saw the gleam of the

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collar around your throat. I did not then know, of course, what it was, or that it was you who 'above all the rest deserved it.' "

And as the Duchess held up a protesting hand, the Princess cried out, sick with jealousy and pain. "Don't lie to me, Marguerite. I heard what he said to the groom. 'Drive the lady home,' he said. And he gave your address."

The Duchess reached Calais only a few minutes before the packet was to sail for Dover. A young man was standing with Mademoiselle Brune at the rail.

The Duchess wasted no time at all. She held out her hand. "Come, Mademoiselle, the collar."

The governess blanched and cringed. "The collar?"

"The Coquauvin Collar of Tears." (To the seven loveliest women of Paris, a diamond apiece; to this whey-faced little strumpet, the Collar of Tears!)

The young Englishman obviously did not understand. But—the hurried change in their plans, their departure rushed forward, the pallor, agitations, and something he now recognised as furtiveness. He cried out, "Marie! You have not stolen something? That package in your reticule—?"

"A gift," stammered the former governess. "A souvenir. Valueless."

"Let us see it," said the Duchess, "this valueless souvenir." She took the girl's reticule from trembling hands. Within folds of tissue the collar coiled like a snake. "An imitation," sobbed Mademoiselle Brune. "Of no value—"

"Then you will not object," said the young man gravely, "if her ladyship takes it back. If indeed," he added, and his firm young voice grew chill, "it was from her ladyship that it came in the first place."

"Well, Mademoiselle?" said the Duchess, waiting for a reply.

A bell clanged, voices cried from ship to shore, and there was a rattle of gangway chains. The former governess stood silent. Over the collar the Duchess' fingers began very slowly to close. She opened her own reticule and slipped the diamond collar in. Only when it was safely shut, did she turn her eyes from Mademoiselle Brune and meet the anxious clear gray eyes of the young man.

"But of course," the Duchess said. "From whom else could it have come?"

And she walked quietly away, went down the narrow gangway, and stepped ashore.

The Duchess never did, in fact, wear the Coquauvin Collar of Tears. It was found at her death, put away, complete with its seven pendant diamonds—together with the unposted letters announcing to all the journals in Paris—the news of her betrothal to Don Juan, le Vicomte Coquauvin.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RICHARD O. LEWIS**

TITLE: ***Fire With Fire***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The Professor of Modern History had been guilty of just one indiscretion. Now he had to pay . . . it was like a page out of "The Roaring Twenties" . . .*

PROFESSOR JOHN GARTEN, STILL clad in his pajamas, was just beginning his morning cup of coffee when the knock sounded on the door of his apartment.

He didn't get up from his chair immediately. He knew who it was. It was the man who called himself Monte. And he knew what the man wanted. He wanted exactly $8000.

That had been the cause of a sleepless night—that and the fact that John Garten didn't have $8000 and didn't have the slightest notion how he could get that amount.

The knock came again, insistent and determined.

The Professor set his cup on the table, went slowly to the door, and clicked back the spring lock.

The man who called himself Monte pushed his way in abruptly and kicked the door shut behind him. He was about the same height as Garten but heavier of build. His face was pudgy—especially above the cheekbones. And the pudginess turned his dark eyes into narrow slits.

The slits made a quick survey of the room, then came back again. "All right," he said. "Hand it over."

John Garten backed off a pace, spread his hands, and raised his shoulders slightly. "I don't have it," he said. "I simply don't have that much money."

"You simply don't have it!" Monte's voice mocked. "Then you simply better get it!"

John felt the sudden clutch of the hand at the front of his pajama jacket and felt the thin fabric tear

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under the quick backward thrust. Off balance, he sprawled into the chair behind him. Red anger leaped up his neck to burn at his ears. "Now look—"

"*You* look!" Monte stationed himself directly in front of the chair, his feet spread, his upper lip curled back from an even row of surprisingly small teeth. "You owe me exactly eight grand," he said, with a studied show of patience. "You lost it in a poker game Thursday night. Remember? You signed an I.O.U. I explained it all to you yesterday morning. I showed you the I.O.U. I told you to bring me the money last night. You didn't. I want it now."

Professor John Garten could remember clearly only certain parts of Thursday night. His wife had left early in the evening to take little Danny to visit his grandmother for a few days. After seeing them off at the bus station, John—like many another man in similar circumstances—had felt a twinge of loneliness.

He had stopped at a bar—Monte's Casino, it was called—to get a beer before returning to the empty apartment, and a stranger had struck up a casual conversation with him. John had told the stranger about his wife and son, and the stranger had bought the Professor another beer.

After that, things began to get hazy and blurred. Dimly he remembered something about a card game and about signing a paper of some kind—a bar tab, he had thought at the time—and then someone had tried to pull him up out of his chair . . .

That was all. The rest was a total blank.

He had awakened Friday morning—he didn't know how he had got to bed the night before—with a splitting headache, a frightful throbbing in his ears, and a tongue-sticking dryness in his mouth. He had called the college and canceled his classes in Modern History for the day on a plea of illness.

And he certainly had been ill! But it was not because of a hangover from two beers.

Then the man who called himself Monte had arrived with the signed slip and had demanded payment of $8000 by nightfall. And now this man Monte was back . . .

"You put something in my drink," John said. "Or you had someone else do it. You drugged me."

"About being drugged I wouldn't know," said Monte. "You kept losing and you kept borrowing from the house. You got into me for eight grand. Now you've got to pay it back."

Suddenly the complete picture of the vile racket became clear. A man comes into the Casino. A stooge at the bar—or did they call it a shill?—engages him in conversation, finds out how vulnerable he is. If he seems helpless to fight back, he is drugged, pulled into a card game, and induced to sign a slip of paper

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for a large sum of money. The signed slip is not legal, of course; it isn't intended to be. It is merely a symbol, something to cast doubt in the victim's mind, to give him a feeling of guilt and uncertainty. Then, the collection.

"I don't owe you *anything!*" John said. "You are trying to extort money from me!"

Monte's right hand slashed out. John felt the sharp sting of the open palm along the left side of his mouth. Half stunned by the unexpectedness of it, he rubbed the back of his hand along his mouth in disbelief. His hand came away, blood-flecked.

Professor John Garten had never been in a fight in his entire life. To him, brute force was an indecency, the outward manifestation of an illogical mind. But, now, the growing anger which had been flushing his body rose to a sudden consuming flame.

He was half out of his chair when the gun appeared miraculously in front of him. It was not a large gun. It scarcely filled the pudgy hand that held it. But the hole in the barrel looked enormous. And John Garten found himself staring directly into that hole.

With an effort he eased back into the chair

"Let's get along real nice now." Monte's lip had curled back again from the little serpent teeth. "Let's not have any trouble. Let's just have the dough."

Only last week John's classes in Modern History had been studying that phase of American life known as "The Roaring Twenties"—the speakeasies, the holdups, the rackets, the mob rule by gangs of hoodlums. Now, it seemed, a character directly out of the pages of the history book was standing before him, standing right in his own living room. It seemed incredible!

John guessed that this man was not a member of a gang. Except for the accomplice at the bar and perhaps one or two other underlings, he was playing a lone—and a very profitable—racket.

"We have wasted enough time." Monte stepped back a pace from the chair. "You have a wife named Grace and a son called Danny. They're away on a visit. You wouldn't want something—say, an *accident*—to happen to them, would you?"

John could scarcely believe his ears. It was hard to believe that indecency such as this could exist in a modern society. Here was a man completely devoid of morals, a man who would stop at nothing in his quest for money.

The burning anger inside the Professor turned to a deep loathing. Here was an evil that should not be permitted to exist, an evil that should be stamped out by whatever means available.

But what could he do? Call the police? He could not in any way prove to them that a crime had been

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committed or that a crime was going to be comitted. It would be only his word against Monte's. Anyway, he could not expect the police to post a perpetual guard over Grace and Danny merely at his request.

Suddenly he felt extremely tired and inadequate. His hands were tied as securely as if they were bound by knotted cords. He wondered how many others, faced by this uncouth and unscrupulous creature, had found themselves in similar circumstances—and had paid to protect themselves and their loved ones.

John started up slowly from the chair. The gun swung in a short menacing arc. "I've got to get dressed," John said. "I'll have to go to the bank and see if I can borrow the money." He moved off toward the bedroom door.

"Let's try no tricks," Monte warned. "Let's not call the cops or do anything foolish like that. You would have to tell them you got drunk, played poker, lost a lot of money, passed out, and had to be taken home. That wouldn't look good for a college professor, would it?"

In the bedroom John opened the top drawer of his dresser and took out the three insurance policies. He thumbed through their long and closely printed pages, making mental calculations of their loan and cash surrender values. The total came to almost $5000—not nearly enough. His car would bring only a few hundred more. Maybe Monte would be satisfied with $5000. Maybe the bank would lend him more than the present value of the policies. Maybe he could borrow from one of those finance companies that exacted exorbitant interest . . .

He let the policies slip from his fingers to the dresser top and slumped wearily on the edge of the bed as his gaze traveled absently around the room.

The apartment was a small one—a living room, kitchenette, and one bedroom—but was all he could afford on his fellowship salary from the college. He could not afford more until he finished his doctorate and received a full professorship.

In a makeshift closet in one corner of the bedroom hung Grace's and Danny's meager wardrobe, except for the few things they had taken with them. In another corner, partially screened off, was Danny's bed. A battered cowboy hat protruded from beneath it, and beside the hat lay the Red Devil costume that Grace had made for him to wear at a masquerade party not too long ago. On the bed, where Danny had left them, was a scarred rubber ball, an overturned train, and a section of bent track. The meager wardrobe and the battered toys, John guessed, would have to do his son for a long, long time.

He got up from the bed, emptied his worn brief case of books and papers, and tossed it on top of the dresser beside the insurance policies.

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Then he took off his pajamas and began to dress, his brain a turmoil of tumbling thoughts.

In the Roaring Twenties, hoodlum had fought hoodlum with blazing guns. But the decent man had no such means of retaliation—not unless he, too, resorted to hoodlum tactics.

Could decency, then, ever hope to win over indecency? Hardly. The decent were always at a disadvantage; they had boundaries of propriety which they could not cross. But the indecent were unrestricted; they could employ any evil they chose, stoop to any level of immorality.

John buckled his trousers, picked a tie from the rack beside the mirror. How could he fight back? How could he rid himself and the world of this blood-sucking leech?

While his brain was tangled in a philosophical mesh—fight evil with evil?—Professor John Garten found himself staring into hollowed eyes that stared back at him from the mirror. He stood that way for a few moments, lost in deep and conflicting thoughts, while the muscles of his stomach began to tie themselves tighter and tighter into hard little knots.

At last he picked up his brief case, his mind made up. Indirectly, both Grace and Danny would have parts to play in the final scene . . .

Monte brought the sedan to a stop in front of the City Trust & Savings Bank, in the area restricted for customers. "Don't do anything foolish," he warned again, letting the motor idle. "If you do, I drive away. Then things will get much worse for you—you can depend on that, Professor."

John nodded and got to the sidewalk. "It will take me a while to make arrangements for a loan of that much money," he said. "I don't know how long."

Monte watched him go in. He seemed to stagger a bit. His face had been pale. Was he sick or something? But that was just like these smug little people—face them with a problem outside their own stupid little world, and they cracked up!

Monte waited, smoking cigarettes halfway through, bending them double between pudgy thumb and fingers, and tossing them out the open window. Between glances at his wrist watch, he watched the door of the bank building with growing impatience.

Thirty minutes passed.

Forty minutes.

Had the guy cracked up completely? Or was he pulling some kind of trick? Had he slipped out the back door? Talked with the cops?

Monte began to get jittery; he had had several run-ins with the cops. How much longer should he wait? Or should he beat it now?

Then his lips drew back from his little teeth in satisfaction. There he was, coming out the door. His face was even paler than before, and he stumbled slightly as he hurried for-

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ward. But the brief case in his hand had a pleasing bulge to it.

Professor John Garten tossed the brief case through the window onto the front seat. "There it is," he gasped. "It's—it's all there. Now give me the I.O.U."

"Sure, sucker!" Monte threw the slip of paper out the window. It fluttered to the sidewalk.

John bent down and picked up the I.O.U. He thrust it into a pocket. Then he stood with one hand on the car door, the other hand clutching at the nervous tightness of his stomach muscles. So much depended now on a certain frightened young woman . . .

It was at that moment the alarm went off—loud, clangorous, nerve-wracking. Almost simultaneously, a uniformed policeman rushed out of the bank, his gun drawn, his whistle blasting.

A sudden look of fear shot across Monte's dark face. The guy *had* tricked him! Some way—but how? Better not wait to find out.

John pointed toward the sedan as it leaped away from the curb on spinning wheels. The armed policeman veered off, began to run down the street. He fired a warning shot into the air.

Another policeman appeared farther down the street, on the run. Obviously he had heard the burglar alarm and the whistle, followed by the pistol shot. Now he saw the speeding car and the gestures of his fellow officer. He opened fire almost point-blank as the car raced toward him.

There was a sudden sound of splintering glass and a squeal of tires that ended abruptly in a vibrating crash as the sedan struck the curb and then a telephone pole.

As the two officers converged on the wrecked car, Monte jumped out and began to race down the street, the brief case in his hand. One of the officers opened fire.

Again it was like a page out of The Roaring Twenties—a page torn from a history book. Monte threw both hands high into the air and pitched forward as if kicked hard between the shoulders. The brief case, swinging in a wide high arc, smashed down heavily against the sidewalk, burst open, and spewed forth its contents.

Small packets of banknotes skittered across the cement and finally came to rest, and among them lay a battered cowboy pistol and a homemade Red Devil mask.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	JACK LONDON
TITLE:	*"Just Meat"*
TYPE:	Crime Story
CRIMINALS:	Jim and Matt
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	Nearly two generations ago
COMMENTS:	*The tale of two thieves in the jungle of crime, and how they stole a fortune in jewels, and how the fat haul was to bring each of them his heart's desire . . .*

HE STROLLED TO THE CORNER and glanced up and down the intersecting street, but saw nothing save the oasis of light shed by the street lamps at the successive crossings. Then he strolled back the way he had come. He was a shadow of a man, sliding noiselessly through the semidarkness. He was like a wild animal in the jungle keenly perceptive and receptive.

In addition to the running advertisement of the state of affairs carried to him by his senses, he had a subtler perception, a *feel*, of the atmosphere around him. He knew that the house in front of which he paused for a moment contained children. Yet by no willed effort of perception did he have this knowledge. For that matter, he was not even aware that he knew. Yet, should a moment arise in which action, in relation to that house, were imperative, he would have acted on the assumption that it contained children.

In the same way, he knew that no danger threatened in the footfalls that came up the cross street. Before he saw the walker, he knew him for a belated pedestrian hurrying home. The walker came into view at the crossing and disappeared on up the street.

The man who watched noted a

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light flare up in the window of a house on the corner, and as it died down he knew it for an expiring match. This was conscious identification of familiar phenomena, and through his mind flitted the thought, "Wanted to know the time." In another house one room was lighted. The light burned dimly and steadily, and he had the feel that it was a sick-room.

He was especially interested in a house across the street in the middle of the block. To this house he paid most attention. No matter what way he looked, nor what way he walked, his looks and his steps always returned to it. Except for an open window above the porch there was nothing unusual about the house. Nothing came in or out. Nothing happened. There were no lighted windows, nor had lights appeared and disappeared in any of the windows. Yet it was the central point of his consideration. He rallied to it each time after a divination of the state of the neighborhood.

Despite his feel of things he was not confident. He was supremely conscious of the precariousness of his situation. Though unperturbed by the footfalls of the chance pedestrian, he was as keyed up and sensitive and ready to be startled as any deer.

Far down the street he caught a glimpse of something that moved. And this he knew represented menace and danger.

He whistled twice to the house across the street, then faded away around the corner. Here he paused and looked about carefully. Reassured, he peered back around the corner and studied the object that moved and that was coming nearer.

He had been right. It was a policeman.

The man went down the cross street to the next corner, from the shelter of which he watched the corner he had just left. He saw the policeman pass by, going straight on up the street. He paralleled the policeman's course and from the next corner again watched him go by; then he returned the way he had come. He whistled once to the house across the street, and after a time whistled once again. There was reassurance in the whistle, just as there had been warning in the previous double whistle.

He saw a dark bulk outline itself on the roof of the porch and slowly descend a pillar. Then it came down the steps, passed through the small iron gate, and went down the sidewalk, taking on the form of a man. The watcher kept on his own side of the street and crossed over on the corner. He was small alongside the other man.

"How'd you make out, Matt?" he asked.

The other grunted and walked on in silence a few steps.

"I reckon I landed the goods, Jim," he said.

Jim chuckled in the darkness and

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waited for further information. But the blocks passed by under their feet, and he grew impatient.

"Well, how about the goods?" he asked. "What kind of a haul did you make, anyway?"

"I was too busy to figger it out, but it's fat. I can tell you that much, Jim, it's fat. I don't dast to think how fat it is. Wait till we get to the room."

Jim looked at Matt keenly under the street lamp of the crossing and saw that his face was a trifle grim and that he carried his left arm peculiarly.

"What's the matter with your arm?" Jim demanded.

"The little cuss bit me. Hope I don't get hydrophoby. Folks gets hydrophoby from man-bite sometimes, don't they?"

"Gave you a fight, eh?" Jim asked encouragingly.

The other grunted.

"You're harder'n hell to get information from," Jim burst out irritably. "Tell us about it. You ain't goin' to lose money just tellin' a guy."

"I guess I choked him some," came the answer. Then, by way of explanation, "He woke up on me."

"You did it neat. I never heard a sound."

"Jim," the other said with seriousness, "it's a hangin' matter. I fixed'm. I had to. He woke up on me. You an' me's got to do some layin' low for a spell."

Jim game a low whistle of comprehension.

"Did you hear me whistle?" he asked suddenly.

"Sure. I was all done. I was just comin' out."

"It was a bull. But he wasn't wise—not even a little bit. Went right by an' kept paddin' the hoof outa sight. Then I come back an gave you the whistle. What made you take so long after that?"

"I was waitin' to make sure," Matt explained. "I was mighty glad when I heard you whistle again. It's hard work waitin'. I just sat there an' thought an' thought . . .it's remarkable what a fellow'll think about. And then there was a darn cat that kept movin' around the house an' botherin' me with its noises."

"An' it's fat!" Jim exclaimed with joy.

"I'm sure tellin' you, Jim, it's fat. I'm hankerin' for another look at 'em."

Unconsciously the two men quickened their pace. Yet they did not relax from their caution. Twice they changed their course in order to avoid policemen, and they made very sure that they were not observed when they dived into the dark hallway of a cheap rooming house downtown.

Not until they had gained their own room on the top floor did they scratch a match. While Jim lighted a lamp, Matt locked the door and threw the bolts into place. As he

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turned, he noticed that his partner was waiting expectantly. Matt smiled to himself at the other's eagerness.

He produced a small flashlight and examined it. "We got to get a new battery. It's runnin' pretty weak. I thought once or twice it'd leave me in the dark. Funny arrangements in that house. I near got lost. His room was on the left, an' that fooled me some."

"I told you it was on the left," Jim interrupted.

"You told me it was on the right," Matt went on. "I guess I know what you told me, an' there's the map you drew."

Fumbling in his vest pocket, he drew out a folded slip of paper. As he unfolded it, Jim bent over and looked.

"I did make a mistake," he confessed.

"You sure did. It had me guessin' for a while."

"But it don't matter now," Jim cried. "Let's see what you got."

"It does matter," Matt retorted. "It matters a lot . . . to me. I've got to run all the risk. I put my head in the trap while you stay on the street. You got to get on to yourself an' be more careful. All right, I'll show you."

He dipped loosely in his pocket and brought out a handful of small diamonds. He spilled them out in a blazing stream on the greasy table. Jim let out a great oath.

"That's nothing," Matt said with triumphant complacence. "I ain't begun yet."

From one pocket after another he continued bringing forth the spoil. There were many diamonds wrapped in chamois skin that were larger than those in the first handful. From one pocket he brought out a handful of very small cut gems.

"Sun dust," he remarked, as he spilled them on the table to one side.

Jim examined them.

"Just the same, they retail for a couple of dollars each," he said. "Is that all?"

"Ain't it enough?" the other demanded in an aggrieved tone.

"Sure it is," Jim answered with unqualified approval. "Better'n I expected. I wouldn't take a cent less than ten thousan' for the bunch."

"Ten thousan'," Matt sneered. "They're worth twic't that, an' I don't know anything about joolery, either. Look at that big boy!"

He picked it out from the sparkling heap and held it near to the lamp with the air of an expert, weighing and judging.

"Worth a thousan' all by its lonely," was Jim's quicker judgment.

"A thousan' your grandmother," was Matt's scornful rejoinder. "You couldn't buy it for three."

"Wake me up! I'm dreamin'!" The glitter of the gems was in Jim's eyes, and he began sorting out the larger diamonds and examining

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them. "We're rich men, Matt—we'll be regular swells."

"It'll take years to get rid of 'em," was Matt's more practical thought.

"But think how we'll live! Nothin' to do but spend the money an'go on gettin' rid of 'em."

Matt's eyes were beginning to sparkle, though somberly, as his phlegmatic nature woke up.

"I told you I didn't dast think how fat it was," he murmured in a low voice.

"What a killin'! What a killin'!" was the other's more ecstatic utterance.

"I almost forgot," Matt said, thrusting his hand into his inside coat pocket.

A string of large pearls emerged from wrappings of tissue paper. Jim scarcely glanced at them.

"They're worth money," he said, and returned to the diamonds.

A silence fell on the two men. Jim played with the gems, running them through his fingers, sorting them into piles, and spreading them out flat and wide. He was a slender, weazened man, nervous, irritable, high-strung, and anemic—a typical product of the gutter, with unbeautiful twisted features, small-eyed, his face and mouth perpetually hungry, brutish in a catlike way, stamped to the core with degeneracy.

Matt did not finger the diamonds. He sat with chin on hands and elbows on table, blinking at the blazing array. He was in every way a contrast to the other. No city had bred him. He was heavy-muscled and hairy, gorilla-like in strength and aspect. For him there was no unseen world. His eyes were full and wide apart, and there seemed in them a certain bold brotherliness. They inspired confidence. But a closer inspection would have shown that his eyes were just a trifle too full, just a shade too wide apart. He exceeded, spilled over the limits of normality, and his features told lies about the man beneath.

"The bunch is worth fifty thousan'," Jim remarked suddenly.

"A hundred thousan'," Matt said.

The silence returned and endured a long time, to be broken again by Jim.

"What in hell was he doin' with 'em all at the house?—that's what I want to know. I'd a-thought he'd kept 'em in the safe down at the store."

Matt had just been considering the vision of the throttled man as he had last looked on him in the dim light of the flashlight; but he did not start at the mention of him.

"There's no tellin'," he answered. "He mighta been gettin' ready to chuck his pardner. He mighta pulled out in the mornin' for parts unknown, if we hadn't happened along. I guess there's just as many thieves among honest men as there is among thieves. You read about such things in the papers, Jim. Pardners is always knifin' each other."

A nervous look came in the

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other's eyes. Matt did not betray that he noted it, though he said, "What was you thinkin' about, Jim?"

Jim was a trifle awkward for the moment.

"Nothin'," he answered. "Only I was thinkin' just how funny it was—all them jools at his house. What made you ask?"

"Nothin'. I was just wonderin', that was all."

The silence settled down, broken by an occasional low and nervous giggle on the part of Jim. He was overcome by the spread of gems. It was not that he felt their beauty. He was unaware that they were beautiful in themselves. But in them his swift imagination visioned the joys of life they would buy, and all the desires and appetites of his diseased mind and sickly flesh were tickled by the promise they extended. He built wondrous, orgy-haunted castles out of their brilliant fires, and was appalled at what he built. Then it was that he giggled. It was all too impossible to be real. And yet there they blazed on the table before him, fanning the flame of his lust.

"I guess we might as well count 'em," Matt said suddenly, tearing himself away from his own visions. "You watch me an' see that it's square, because you an' me has got to be on the square, Jim. Understand?"

Jim did not like this, and betrayed it in his eyes, while Matt did not like what he saw in his partner's eyes.

"Understand?" Matt repeated, menacingly.

"Ain't we always been square?" the other replied, on the defensive because of the treachery already whispering in him.

"It don't cost nothin', bein' square in hard times," Matt retorted. "It's bein' square in prosperity that counts. When we ain't got nothin', we can't help bein' square. We're prosperous now, an' we've got to be businessmen—honest businessmen. Understand?"

"That's the talk for me," Jim approved. But deep down in the meager soul of him—and in spite of him—wanton and lawless thoughts were stirring like chained beasts.

Matt stepped to the food shelf behind the two-burner kerosene cooking stove. He emptied the tea from a paper bag, and from a second bag some red peppers. Returning to the table with the bags, he put into them the two sizes of small diamonds. Then he counted the large gems and wrapped them in their tissue paper and chamois skin.

"Hundred an' forty-seven good-sized ones," was his inventory; "twenty real big ones; two big boys and one whopper; an' a couple of fistfuls of teeny ones an' dust."

He looked at Jim.

"Correct," was the response.

He wrote the count out on a slip

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of paper, and made a copy of it, giving one slip to his partner and retaining the other.

"Just for reference," he said.

Again he had recourse to the food shelf, where he had emptied the sugar from a large paper bag. Into this he thrust the diamonds, large and small, wrapped the bag in a bandana handkerchief, and stowed it away under his pillow. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and took off his shoes.

"An' you think they're worth a hundred thousan'?" Jim asked, pausing and looking up from unlacing his own shoes.

"Sure," was the answer. "I seen a dancehouse girl down in Arizona once with some big sparklers on her. They wasn't real. She said if they was she wouldn't be dancin'. Said they'd be worth all of fifty thousan', an' she didn't have a dozen of 'em all told."

"Who'd work for a livin'?" Jim triumphantly demanded. "Pick an' shovel work!" he sneered. "Work like a dog all my like an' save all my wages, an' I wouldn't have half as much as we got tonight."

"Dishwashin's about your measure, an' you couldn't get more'n peanuts a month an' board. Your figgers is 'way off, but your point is well taken. Let them that likes it, work. I rode range for forty a month when I was young an' foolish. Well, I'm older, an' I ain't ridin' range."

He got into bed on one side. Jim put out the light and followed him in on the other side.

"How's your arm feel?" Jim queried amiably.

Such concern was unusual, and Matt noted it.

"I guess there's no danger of hydrophoby. What made you ask?"

Jim felt a guilty stir, and under his breath he cursed the other's way of asking disagreeable questions; but aloud he answered, "Nothin', only you seemed scared of it at first. What are you goin to do with your share, Matt?"

"Buy a cattle ranch in Arizona an' set down an' pay other men to ride range for me. There's some several I'd like to see askin' a job from me, damn them! An' now you shut your face, Jim. It'll be some time before I buy that ranch. Just now I'm goin' to sleep."

But Jim lay awake, nervous and twitching, rolling about restlessly and rolling himself wide-awake every time he dozed. The diamonds still blazed under his eyelids, and the fire of them hurt. Matt, in spite of his heavy nature, slept lightly, like a wild animal alert in its sleep; and Jim noticed, every time he moved, that his partner's body moved sufficiently to show that it had received the impression and that it was trembling on the verge of awakening. For that matter, Jim did not know whether or not, frequently, the other was awake. Once, quietly, betokening complete consciousness, Matt said to him,

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"Aw, go to sleep, Jim. Don't worry about them jools. They'll keep." And Jim had thought at that particular moment that Matt had been sound asleep.

In the late morning Matt was awake with Jim's first movement, and thereafter he awoke and dozed with him until midday, when they got up together and began dressing.

"I'm goin' out to get a paper an' some bread," Matt said. "You boil the coffee."

As Jim listened, unconsciously his gaze left Matt's face and roved to the pillow, beneath which was the bundle wrapped in the bandana handkerchief. On the instant Matt's face became like a wild beast's.

"Look here, Jim," he snarled. "You've got to play square. If you do me dirt, I'll fix you. Understand? I'd eat you, Jim. You know that. I'd bite right into your throat an' eat you like that much beefsteak."

His sunburned skin was black with the surge of blood in it, and his tobacco-stained teeth were exposed by the snarling lips. Jim shivered and involuntarily cowered. There was death in the man he looked at. Only the night before Matt had killed another with his hands, and it had not hurt his sleep. And in his own heart Jim was aware of a sneaking guilt, of a train of thought that merited all that was threatened.

Matt went out, leaving Jim still shivering. Then hatred twisted his face, and he hurled savage curses at the door. He hastened to the bed, feeling under the pillow for the bandana bundle. He crushed it with his fingers to make certain that it still contained the diamonds. Assured that Matt had not carried them away, he looked toward the kerosene stove with a guilty start. Then he hurriedly lighted it, filled the coffeepot at the sink, and put it over the flame.

The coffee was boiling when Matt returned, and while the latter cut the bread and put a slice of butter on the table, Jim poured out the coffee. It was not until he sat down and had taken a few sips of the coffee that Matt pulled out the morning paper from his pocket.

"We was way off," he said. "I told you I didn't dast figger out how fat it was. Look at that."

He pointed to the headlines on the first page.

SWIFT NEMESIS ON BUJANNOFF'S TRACK, they read. *MURDERED IN HIS SLEEP AFTER ROBBING HIS PARTNER.*

"There you have it!" Matt cried. "He robbed his partner—robbed him like a dirty thief."

"Half a million of jewels missin'," Jim read aloud. He put the paper down and stared at Matt.

"That's what I told you," the latter said. "What in hell do we know about jools? Half a million! —an' the best I could figger it was a hundred thousan'. Go on an' read the rest of it."

They read on silently, their heads

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side by side, the untouched coffee growing cold.

"I'd like to seen Metzner's face when he opened the safe at the store this mornin'," Jim gloated.

"He hit the high places right away for Bujannoff's house," Matt explained. "Go on an' read."

"Was to have sailed last night at ten on the *Sojoda* for South Seas —steamship delayed by extra freight—"

"That's why we caught 'm in bed," Matt interrupted. "It was just luck—like pickin' a fifty-to-one winner."

"*Sojoda* sailed at six this mornin'—"

"He didn't catch her," Matt said. "I saw his alarm clock was set at five. That'd given 'm plenty of time . . . only I come along an' put the kibosh on him. Go on."

"Adolph Metzner in despair—the famous Haythorne pearl necklace—magnificently assorted pearls —valued by experts at from fifty to seventy thousan' dollars."

Jim broke off to swear vilely and solemnly, concluding with, "Those damn oyster-eggs worth all that money!" He licked his lips and added, "They was beauties an' no mistake."

"Big Brazilian gem," he read on. "Eighty thousan' dollars—many valuable gems of the first water—several thousan'."

"What you don't know about jools is worth knowin'," Matt smiled good-humoredly.

"Theory of the sleuths," Jim read. "Thieves must have known—cleverly kept watch on Bujannoff's actions—must have learned his plan and trailed him to his house with the fruits of his robbery—"

"Clever—hell!" Matt broke out. "That's the way reputations is made . . . in the newspapers. How'd we know he was robbin' his pardner?"

"Anyway, we've got the goods," Jim grinned. "Let's look at 'em again."

He assured himself that the door was locked and bolted, while Matt brought out the bundle in the bandana and opened it on the table.

"Ain't they beauties, though!" Jim exclaimed at sight of the pearls; and for a time he had eyes only for them. "Accordin' to the experts, worth from fifty to seventy thousan' dollars."

"An' women like them things," Matt commented. "An' they'll do everything to get 'em—sell themselves, commit murder, anything."

"Just like you an' me."

"Not on your life," Matt retorted. "I'll commit murder for 'em, but not for their own sakes, only for what they'll get me. That's the difference. Women want the jools for themselves, an' I want the jools for the women an' such things they'll get me."

"Lucky that men an' women don't want the same things," Jim remarked.

"That's what makes commerce,"

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Matt agreed; "people wantin' different things."

In the middle of the afternoon Jim went out to buy food. While he was gone, Matt cleared the table of the jewels, wrapping them up as before, and putting them under the pillow. Then he lighted the kerosene stove and started to boil water for the coffee. A few minutes later Jim returned.

"Most surprising," he remarked. "Streets an' stores an' people just like they always was. Nothin' changed. An' me walkin' along through it all a millionnaire. Nobody looked at me an' guessed it."

Matt grunted unsympathetically. He had little comprehension of the lighter whims and fancies of his partner's imagination.

"Did you get a porterhouse?" he demanded.

"Sure, an' an inch thick. It's a peach. Look at it."

He unwrapped the steak and held it up for the other's inspection. Then he made the coffee and set the table, while Matt cooked the steak.

"Don't put on too much of them red peppers," Jim warned. "I ain't used to your Mexican cookin'. You always season too hot."

Matt grunted a laugh and went on with his cooking. Jim poured out the coffee; but first, into the nicked china cup, he emptied a powder he had carried in his vest pocket wrapped in a rice paper. He had turned his back for the moment on his partner, but he did not dare to glance around at him. Meanwhile Matt cut the steak in half, and served Jim and himself.

"Eat her while she's hot," he counseled, and with knife and fork set the example.

"She's a dandy," was Jim's judgment, after his first mouthful. "But I tell you one thing straight. I'm never goin' to visit you on that Arizona ranch, so you needn't ask me."

"What's the matter now?" Matt asked.

"The Mexican cookin' on your ranch'd be too much for me. If I've got hell a-comin' in the next life, I'm not goin' to torment my insides in this one. Damned peppers!"

Jim expelled his breath forcibly to cool his burning mouth, drank some coffee, and went on eating the steak.

"What do you think about the next life anyway, Matt?" he asked a little later, while secretly he wondered why the other had not yet touched his coffee.

"Ain't no next life," Matt answered, pausing from the steak to take his first sip of coffee. "Nor heaven nor hell, nor nothin'. You get all that's comin' right here in this life."

"An' afterward?" Jim queried out of his morbid curiosity, for he knew that he looked upon a man that was soon to die. "An' afterward?" he repeated.

"Did you ever see a man two weeks dead?" the other asked.

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Jim shook his head.

"Well, I have. He was like this beefsteak you an' me is eatin'. It was once steer cavortin' over the landscape. But now it's just meat. That's all, just meat. An' that's what you an' me an' all people come to—meat."

Matt gulped down the whole cup of coffee, and refilled the cup.

"Are you scared to die?" he asked.

Jim shook his head. "What's the use? I don't die, anyway. I pass on an' live again—"

"To go stealin' an' lyin' an' snivelin' through another life, an' go on that way forever an' ever?" Matt sneered.

"Maybe I'll improve," Jim suggested hopefully. "Maybe stealin' won't be necessary in the life to come."

He ceased abruptly, and stared straight before him, a frightened expression on his face.

"What's the matter?" Matt demanded.

"Nothin'. I was just wonderin'" —Jim returned to himself with an effort—"about this dyin', that was all."

But he could not shake off the fright that had startled him. It was as if an unseen thing of gloom had passed by him, casting on him the intangible shadow of its presence. He was aware of a feeling of foreboding. Something ominous was about to happen. Calamity hovered in the air. He gazed fixedly across the table at the other man. He could not understand. Was it that he had blundered and poisoned himself? No, Matt had the nicked cup, and he had certainly put the poison in the nicked cup.

It was all his own imagination, was his next thought. It had played him tricks before. Fool! Of course it was. Of course something was about to happen, but it was about to happen to Matt. Had not Matt drunk the whole cup of coffee?

Jim brightened up and finished his steak, sopping bread in the gravy when the meat was gone.

"When I was a kid—" he began, but broke off abruptly.

Again the unseen thing of gloom had fluttered, and his being was vibrant with premonition of impending misfortune. He felt a disruptive influence at work in the flesh of him, and his muscles felt as if they were about to twitch.

He sat back suddenly, and as suddenly leaned forward with his elbows on the table. A tremor ran dimly through his body. It was like the first rustling of leaves before the oncoming of wind. He clenched his teeth. It came again, a spasmodic tensing of his muscles. He knew panic at the revolt within his being. His muscles no longer recognized his mastery over them.

Again they spasmodically tensed despite him, for he had willed that they should not tense. The terror of impotence rushed up in him as his flesh gripped and seemed to seize him in a clutch, chills running up

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and down his back and sweat starting on his brow.

He glanced about the room, and all the details of it smote him with a strange sense of familiarity. It was as though he had just returned from a long journey. He looked across the table at his partner. Matt was watching him and smiling. An expression of horror spread over Jim's face.

"My God, Matt!" he screamed. "You ain't poisoned me?"

Matt smiled and continued to watch him. In the paroxysm that followed, Jim did not become unconscious. His muscles twitched and knotted, crushing him in their savage grip.

And in the midst of it all, it came to him that Matt was acting queerly. He was traveling the same road. The smile had gone from his face, and there was on it an intent expression, as if he were listening to some inner tale of himself and trying to devine its message.

Matt got up and walked across the room and back again, then sat down.

"You did this, Jim," he said quietly.

"But I didn't think you'd try to fix me," Jim answered reproachfully.

"Oh, I fixed you all right," Matt said, with teeth close together and shivering body. "What did you give me?"

"Strychnine."

"Same as I gave you," Matt volunteered. "It's a hell of a mess, ain't it?"

"You're lyin', Matt," Jim pleaded. "You ain't poisoned me, have you?"

"I sure did, Jim; an' I didn't overdose you, neither. I cooked it in as neat as you please in your half the porterhouse.—Hold on! Where're you goin'?"

Jim had made a dash for the door and was throwing back the bolts. Matt sprang in between and shoved him away.

"Drug store," Jim panted. "Drug store."

"No you don't. You'll stay right here. There ain't goin' to be any runnin' out an makin' a poison play on the street—not with all them jools under the pillow. Savvy? Even if you didn't die, you'd be in the hands of the police with a whole lot of explanations comin'. Emetics is the stuff for poison. I'm just as bad bit as you, an' I'm goin'to take a emetic. That's all they'd give you at a drug store, anyway."

He thrust Jim back into the middle of the room and shot the bolts into place. As he went across the floor to the food shelf, he passed one hand over his brow and flung off the beaded sweat. It spattered audibly on the floor.

Jim watched agonizedly as Matt got the mustard can and a cup and ran for the sink. He stirred a cupful of mustard and water and drank it down.

Jim had followed him and was reaching with trembling hands for the empty cup. Again Matt shoved

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him away. As he mixed a second cupful, he demanded, "D'you think one cup'll do for me? You can wait till I'm done."

Jim started to totter toward the door, but Matt checked him.

"If you monkey with that door, I'll twist your neck. Savvy? You can take yours when I'm done. An' if it saves you, I'll twist your neck, anyway. You ain't got no chance, nohow. I told you many times what you'd get if you did me dirt."

"But you did me dirt, too," Jim said with an effort.

Matt was drinking the second cupful, and did not answer. The sweat had got into Jim's eyes, and he could scarcely see his way to the table, where he got a cup for himself. But Matt was mixing a third cupful and, as before, thrust Jim away.

"I told you to wait till I was done," Matt growled. "Get outa my way."

Jim supported his twitching body by holding onto the sink, while he yearned toward the yellowish concoction that stood for life. It was by sheer will that he stood and clung to the sink. His flesh strove to double him up and bring him to the floor.

Matt drank the third cupful, and with difficulty managed to get to a chair and sit down. His first paroxysm was passing. The spasms that afflicted him were dying away. This good effect he ascribed to the mustard and water. He was safe, at any rate. He wiped the sweat from his face and in the interval of calm found room for curiosity. He looked at his partner.

A spasm had shaken the mustard can out of Jim's hands, and the contents were spilled on the floor. He bent over to scoop some of the mustard into the cup, and the succeeding spasm doubled him upon the floor. Matt smiled.

"Stay with it," he encouraged. "It's the stuff all right. It's fixed me up."

Jim heard him and turned toward him a stricken face, twisted with suffering and pleading. Spasm now followed spasm till he was in convulsions, rolling on the floor and yellowing his face an hair in the mustard.

Matt laughed hoarsely at the sight, but the laugh broke midway. A tremor had run through his body. A new paroxysm was beginning. He arose and staggered across to the sink where, with probing forefinger, he vainly strove to assist the action of the emetic. In the end, he clung to the sink as Jim had clung, filled with the horror of going down to the floor.

The other's paroxysm had passed. He sat up, weak and fainting, too weak to rise, his forehead dripping, his lips flecked with a foam made yellow by the mustard in which he had rolled. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, and groans that were like whines came from his throat.

"What are you snifflin' about?" Matt demanded out of his agony.

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"All you got to do is die. An' when you die you're dead."

"I ain't snifflin' — it's the mustard stingin' my eyes," Jim panted.

It was his last successful attempt at speech.

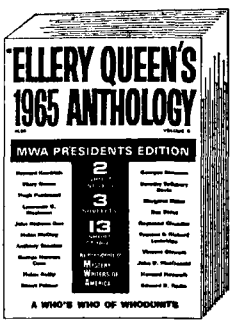
Thereafter he babbled incoherently, pawing the air with shaking arms till a fresh convulsion stretched him on the floor.

Matt struggled back to the chair and doubled up on it, his arms clasped about his knees. He came out of the convulsion cool and weak. He looked to see how it went with Jim, and saw him lying motionless.

He tried to soliloquize, to be facetious, to have his last grim laugh at life, but his lips made only incoherent sounds. The thought came to him that the emetic had failed, and that nothing remained but the drug store. He looked toward the door and drew himself to his feet. There he saved himself from falling by clutching the chair.

Another paroxysm had begun. And in the midst of the paroxysm, with his body and all the parts of it flying apart and writhing and twisting back into knots, he clung to the chair and shoved it before him across the floor.

The last shreds of his will were leaving him when he gained the door. He turned the key and shot back one bolt. He fumbled for the second bolt, but failed. Then he leaned his weight against the door and slid gently to the floor.



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One of The Great Detective's early cases ("lost lo, these many years" and at long last "resurrected") and surely one of his most "brilliant" . . . what a Master Manhunter the indomitable (and inimitable) Schlock Homes was (and is)!

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BIG PLUNGER

by ROBERT L. FISH

TO MY FRIEND MR. SCHLOCK Homes, inactivity was the deadliest foe with which he was ever forced to grapple. At those times, when interesting cases were not forthcoming, he would lie slumped in his chair before the fireplace in our quarters at 221B Bagel Street, his eyes dull and unseeing, lighting one Armenian from another and allowing them to burn out in his fingers. I had warned him many times that the scars would remain, but when Homes was in one of his moods it was most difficult to reason with him.

I was most strongly reminded of this characteristic of his quite recently when, in the course of groping blindly beneath my lowboy in search of a missing tuppence, I chanced upon an old folio of my notes which had been lost lo, these many years! I immediately squatted back upon my heels to peruse it, the years and my tuppence instantly forgotten. And there, in my own scrabbled hand, I read the delineation of the early cases in which Homes and I had been involved.

One such period of inactivity, it appeared, had occurred in the year '29, and had been all the worse for having followed upon the solution of a problem which had been exceptionally challenging. At the request of the Moroccan government, Homes had spent the summer in North Africa tracing down an illicit cinema theatre which had been inciting the natives to revolt through the presentation of inflammatory films.

With his usual brilliant display of genius, Homes had eventually managed to trace the plot to an ex-German adventurer known as "Sahara" Bernhardt; the illegal theatre —called "The Desert Fox"— he had personally located and destroyed. Naturally, after such excitement, the dullness of a damp London autumn lay particularly heavy upon him, especially since there seemed to be no immediate clientele for his exceptional analytical powers.

On this particular day, however— a grey, rainy afternoon in October, as I recall—I returned from my medical rounds to find Homes a changed

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man. Where I had left him dull-eyed and bored, I returned to find him pacing the floor in barely concealed excitement, his eyes alive and dancing once again. At sight of me he smiled his old smile and extended a telegraph form in my direction.

"A message from my brother Criscroft, Watney!" he exclaimed. "He has urgent need of my services. At last my ennui shall end!"

I nodded in delighted satisfaction. Criscroft Homes, whose position in the Foreign Office was a bit difficult to define, was not only Homes's sole relative, but also by far his favorite. Many a time we had visited him at his club, where he usually sat alone contemplating his Naval responsibilities or some other weighty military problem. For him to request aid of Homes was a sure indication of an interesting problem.

I reached for the telegraph form, but before I could take it there came the sound of footsteps upon the stairs, and a moment later Criscroft himself had entered the room, crossed it to shake our hands fervently, and in almost the same motion flung himself into a chair by the fireplace, frowning at us both. A moment later he spoke.

"I hope you are free, Schlock," said he heavily, and leaned forward as if the comfort of his accommodation was somehow alien to the seriousness of his mission.

"Free? I have never been more free!" Homes dropped into a chair across from his brother and looked at him with gleaming eyes. "What is the problem?"

For several moments Criscroft did not answer. He cast his eyes towards the sideboard as if searching for words. I hastened to prepare libations even as I covertly studied the two men. I could not help but note, as I muddled the mixtures, the startling resemblance between the two brothers despite their great differences in height, weight, colouring, facial features, and general appearance. In silence I served them and then retired to one side to listen.

For a moment Criscroft fingered his drink in thoughtful quietude and then, quaffing deeply, set his glass reluctantly to one side.

"Are you acquainted with Lord Fynch-fframis?" he asked at last.

"The noted financier? Only by name," Homes replied.

"I am afraid you will never know him in any other manner," Criscroft said sadly. "He is dead, and a certain Silas Weatherbeaten, an American, is being held in custody at Bow Street on suspicion of his murder."

"Weatherbeaten? The American financial genius?"

"None other. And, I might mention, the colonial denies any part in the sinister affair. His Embassy has been around to us, and we are put in the position where we must either prove his complicity or release him at once. Needless to say, relations between our great country and theirs could become strained were

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we to make a mistake in this matter, and for this reason I wish to enlist your aid."

"Give me the details," Homes said simply.

"Of course. Well, the story is this: Lord Fynch-fframis either fell, jumped, or was pushed from his offices on top of the Exchange this morning at 9:45 A.M. At the time of the unfortunate occurrence, the only one present with him in his office was this same Silas Weatherbeaten. The American's story is that the two men had been talking when Fynch-fframis walked to the stock ticker in one corner, after which he gasped, turned pale, wiped his forehead and then with no further ado, flung himself headlong through the window."

"The stock ticker? What is that?" asked Homes.

"I have no idea. I am merely repeating Weatherbeaten's words."

"No matter. It can scarcely concern us where the man walked just prior to the plunge. Pray continue."

"Well, Schlock, since there were no other witnesses, we have only Weatherbeaten's story to go on. Scotland Yard has been unable to uncover any history of previous enmity between the two men; but on the other hand they have also been unable to establish the slightest reason for Fynch-fframis to take his own life. As you can well imagine, the situation leaves us in the Foreign Office in a serious dilemma."

"I understand. And that's all you have to give me?"

"All except this." Criscroft paused to delve into a pocket, sorted through the conglomeration he extracted, and finally came up with a thin slip of paper. "When Lord Fynch-fframis was picked up, he was found to be clutching this strip of paper. To the best of our knowledge it represents a code, and a code so devilishly complicated that to this moment Department M5 has had no success at all in solving it."

At these words Homes's eyes glittered feverishly and he reached forward with eagerness, taking the slip from his brother's fingers and bending forward to peruse it intently. At the frown that appeared on his face I stepped behind him and read the puzzling message over his shoulder. It was neatly printed on a thin strip of yellowish paper and I reproduce the mysterious hieroglyphics for the reader's inspection:

. . . T-T 7½ . . . AllAf 44
. . . AlRs 12 . . . G&F 11
. . . T-T 7 . . . AllAf 43 . . .
AlRs 11½ . . . G&F 10⅝
. . . T-T 6⅝ . . . AllAf 42
. . . AlRs 11 . . . G&F 10
. . . T-T 6½ . . .

"Well?" The harshness of Criscroft's voice betrayed his anxiety. "Can you make anything of it?"

Homes remained in a brown

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study, his eyes scanning the strange message. Then he raised his head slowly, a curious expression on his face. "At the moment, no," he said slowly. "It bears no resemblance to any other code or cipher I have ever seen."

Criscroft drew himself to his feet and stared down at his brother. "I am sure you have solved more difficult ones, Schlock," he said at last. "You are aware of the urgency of this matter. Should you require me, I shall be available at any time. A messenger can reach me at my club."

"Good." Homes came to his feet, extending his hand. "Be sure I shall get right to it!"

Once Criscroft had left the premises, Homes fell back into his chair, staring at the mysterious message with a fierce scowl upon his face, while I studied it over his shoulder. Suddenly a possible solution occurred to me.

"Homes!" I cried. "These odd figures could well represent street addresses! 'T-T' could stand for Tottenham Towers, and 'G&F' might well be the corner of Grantham and Frobisher Streets."

He shook his head slowly, his eyes never leaving the message. "I doubt it, Watney. I am familiar with Tottenham Towers and as far as I know the apartment numbers run evenly. I cannot recall any Apartment 7½."

I attempted to bring to mind the numbering system at the famous Towers, but to no avail. Homes turned to his shelf of reference volumes and selecting one, he swiftly became lost in its pages. I waited patiently until, some moments later, he flung it from him with a barely concealed curse.

"Useless!" he muttered, almost in anger, and returned once again to his fruitless study of the flimsy slip of paper. At length he raised his eyes to me.

"I fear my recent spell of inactivity has dulled my brain, Watney," he said sadly.

"Never!" I protested as loyally as I could.

Despite his preoccupation, a faint twinkle had come into his fine eyes. "Or possibly it is simply that I am no longer used to labour," he said. "If labour is the answer, however, time can handle that." And drawing his chair to the table he began the series of permutations necessary to decoding the thin strip.

Dinnertime came, but Homes worked on. Our housekeeper, Mrs. Essex, was on holiday and I suggested that Homes join me at a nearby restaurant, but he refused. And when I left to eat, it was to leave him still at it, frozen in his chair, his eyes poring intently over the thin yellow slip, and his thin fingers racing across his scratch-sheets . . .

I dined leisurely, knowing that when Homes was involved in a problem he did not particularly appreciate my presence. I had a brandy

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and cigar, and then walked slowly back to our quarters. I mounted the staircase and entered the room to find Homes in conference with a ragged street urchin. The lad, of mixed Chinese-Israeli parentage, was known as Matzo-Tung and was the leader of the Bagel Street Regulars.

Together with Homes the boy was bent over a large street-map of the city, and as I entered both raised their eyes to me. I was shocked by the haggard expression on Homes's face; it was apparent that he had not paused for refreshment since I had left.

"Good evening," I said brightly, attempting to instill some cheer in the atmosphere. "Are you any forrader?"

Homes shook his head dispiritedly. "No, Watney," he said wearily. "I am reduced to clutching at straws. I have exhausted all other possibilities and am compelled to accept your suggestion that these strange hieroglyphics refer to street addresses indeed. The Bagel Street Regulars will check them out for me. Should this last lead be barren, I fear I shall be forced to confess failure!" With a sigh he turned to the young ragamuffin.

"Your instructions are clear?"

"Raht, Guv'nor."

"One lad to each address," Homes said sternly, "and the name of the tenant back here as quickly as possible."

"Raht, Guv'nor," said the lad and moved to the door.

"And mind the stairs," I said absently as he reached for the knob.

"The apples? I'll take 'em cheesy, Guv'nor."

He started to turn the knob, then paused with an odd expression on his face, and I saw he was staring over my shoulder at Homes. I turned and to my amazement I saw that my friend was waving his hands frantically, his face distorted. I hurried to his side.

"Homes!" I cried anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"All right? I am a fool! What a fool I am! You, lad! Forget your errand! And here's a shilling for your trouble!"

Homes turned to me, all traces of weariness fled from his face, as the puzzled street urchin took the coin and slipped down the steps. "Watney! One moment while I change to proper clothing and we are off to visit my brother. How stupid I have been!"

And with no further comment he dashed from the room, removing his dressing-gown as he went.

I waited in mystified silence until, a few moments later, he emerged from his room straightening his weskit, and a second later I found myself being propelled down the stairway. Homes waved a passing hansom to the curb and hustled me inside.

"Homes!" I cried, tugging my arm free and straightening the fab-

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ric. "You have discovered the answer to this problem?"

"I have indeed!" My friend leaned back and patted his coat pocket where the mysterious strip of paper now lay. His eyes gleamed. "But I do not apologize for my delay, for it followed none of the normal, or even abnormal, rules of cryptography. And why?" His eyes twinkled. "Because it was never meant to be a code!"

Before I could ask an explanation of this strange statement, his eyes went to his timepiece and then to the man on the box. "Driver! A shilling bonus if you have us in Curzon Street in eight minutes!"

We came flying down Park Lane, turned precariously into Curzon Street with squealing wheel hubs, and seconds later the driver was hauling desperately upon the reins as we approached the club of which Criscroft Homes was a member. Homes was on the pavement before we had come to a halt, had paid the driver, and was pulling me impatiently up the broad stone steps of the club.

He brushed past the doorman, nodded distantly to the cloakroom attendant, and turned into the library where, in one corner, Criscroft sat moodily. At the commotion our entrance provoked, he came to his feet and hurried forward as quietly as he could.

"Schlock," he said in a low whisper, obviously torn between the club rules for silence and his necessity for our information. He glanced about. "Not here. Come!"

He drew us hastily from the room, led us through a series of narrow corridors, until we found the kitchen. There he ensconced us on hard chairs, seated himself, and spoke in a normal tone of voice.

"Sorry," he said quietly, and then added in more anxious tones, "Do you bring me the news I have been awaiting? Are you able to help me resolve my desperate dilemma?"

"I am," Homes replied with quiet triumph. He leaned forward, narrowly avoiding a scalding teapot. "There is but one bit of information I require in order to complete my case. Am I correct in assuming that Lord Fynch-fframis originally came from common stock? That he was, as a matter of fact, born within the decibel range of the Bow Bells?"

We both stared at him in amazement.

"That is true," Criscroft said at last, staring hard at his brother. "Although how you ever managed to deduce it remains a mystery to me! It was knowledge that was kept secret even from Debrett's. I only obtained the true facts myself, less than an hour ago." He leaned forward, a querying frown upon his face. "But how can this information possibly aid you?"

Homes smiled. "You shall soon see." His smile faded, to be replaced with a most serious expression. "The important thing is that you may now, with a clear con-

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science, free Mr. Silas Weatherbeaten. He was but an innocent spectator to this tragic affair."

Criscroft's eyes widened. "You can prove this?"

"I can." Without further ado, Homes reached into his pocket and produced the mysterious strip of paper. Brushing aside some crumbs, he spread it out upon a nearby breadboard. His strong, thin fingers pointed to the words while his tone assumed that degree of pedantic superiority which was so usual with him when he was explaining the successful solution to one of his cases.

"When first I saw this queer admixture of letters and numerals," said he, his eyes fixed upon us both intently, "I attempted to solve it through the standard methods of cryptology, as well as through the application of certain mathematical formulæ which I have been fortunate enough to develop personally. All my efforts — I can now freely admit—were without success. Then, in desperation, I was about to send young Matzo-Tung out on what would have proven to be a futile quest, when he happened to use a phrase that immediately clarified the entire affair to me. A moment's thought and the picture was clear!"

"But, Homes," I protested, "I heard every word the young lad spoke, and I can see nothing in his words that could possibly aid in the solution of this problem."

"Watney, you hear with your ears rather than with your intelligence," Homes replied cryptically. "Do you not recall the young boy saying, 'The apples? I'll take 'em cheesy, Guv'nor'?" His mimicry was remarkable as he duplicated exactly the heavy Cockney accent of the street urchin.

I stared at him in amazement. "But how could that possibly help, Homes?"

"He was using Cockney rhyming slang, Watney!"

"Cockney rhyming slang?"

"Precisely!" He laughed at my blank expression. "I can see that you are not familiar with the Cockney, Watney. He chooses many ways in which to express himself, and the most famous, of course, is his rhyming slang. In order to state a word, he chooses a phrase of which the final word rhymes with the word he is attempting to express. For example, the Cockney will say 'storm and strife,' when he wishes to say 'wife.' And many of them, with time, have come to even leave off the last part of the phrase, so that 'storm' becomes 'wife'."

I stared at him. His eyes twinkled.

"Yes, Watney! Take our little ragamuffin this evening, for instance. 'Apples,' of course, is from the Cockney phrase of 'apples and pears,' which means 'stairs.' 'Cheesy' means 'easy.' He was simply assuring you that he would go down the steps with care."

His face sobered. "The moment he spoke I saw all. The mysterious

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message became crystal clear. Come, let me demonstrate."

His fingers slid along the lines of the strange message.

" 'T-T' can only be 'Tit-for-Tat' —or 'hat.' 'AllAf' is 'All Afloat'—or 'coat.' 'A1Rs' is the famous 'Almond Rocks' that the Cockney uses to refer to his socks. And 'G&F' can only be 'Greens-and-Fruits' with which he designates his boots."

"Hat?" I asked, completely mystified. "Coat? Socks? Boots?"

"Exactly!"

"But the numbers, Homes," I said in bewilderment. "What significance can they possibly have?"

"Sizes, of course," Homes replied quietly.

We stared at him, considering his startling deduction. At last Criscroft cleared his throat and spoke. "But, Schlock—the numbers are continually decreasing."

"Precisely! And that is the answer!" The great detective's eyes gleamed; his deep voice became even deeper. "*The poor man was wasting away!* In all probability from some incurable disease. He was not wiping his brow when Weather-beaten saw him this morning; he was undoubtedly trying to check the progress of his dread condition. And when he saw that it had not abated, but had even increased in tempo, he knew there was truly no hope for him, and that death was to be preferred to waiting until he was, quite literally, a shadow of his former self."

Words failed both Criscroft and myself at this remarkable demonstration of Homes's extraordinary reasoning powers. Impulsively I thrust out my hand in heartfelt congratulations.

"Magnificent, Homes!" I exclaimed, overcome with admiration.

Criscroft arose with shining eyes and placed his arms about his younger brother's shoulders in a demonstration of affection quite rare for a Foreign Office personality.

"Schlock, you may well have saved England another *cause célèbre*," said he solemnly, and brushed the hint of a tear from his cheek.

Homes shook his head modestly. "Do not thank me," he said quietly. "Thank the Bagel Street Regulars, or even Lord Fynch-fframis himself. It was his unconscious reversion to his childhood language when faced with a crisis that solved this case, not me."

"Nonsense!" Criscroft replied roundly. He cast his eyes about. "This calls for a drink. Cook!"

The following morning I was in the process of simultaneously attempting to reach for my Brussels Sprouts juice and open the morning journal, when Homes entered our breakfast room. He nodded to me pleasantly and drew up a chair.

Knowing my friend's desire for the news as quickly as possible, I forewent my vegetable tonic and spread the newspaper to its fullest.

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Black ink in profusion sprang to my eye; it took a second or two until the full import of the startling headlines registered upon my brain.

Homes had been reaching indolently for his napkin; at the sight of the horrified expression upon my face he paused, considering me wonderingly.

"Something that might be of interest to us, Watney?" he queried.

"Homes!" I cried, unfolding the journal further, and then doubling it to present him with the scarelines. "Look! The stock market has crashed!"

For a moment he hesitated and then, after careful consideration, he completed the maneuver of placing his napkin in his lap. His fine eyes were warm with sympathy as he replied.

"Well," said he softly, "there is one consolation. At least poor Lord Fynch-fframis was spared the added pain of seeing his life's savings swept away in the holocaust."

I stared at him, a wave of admiration for his understanding flooding me.

"True," I said, and turned the page.

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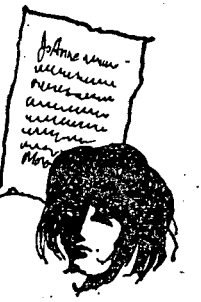

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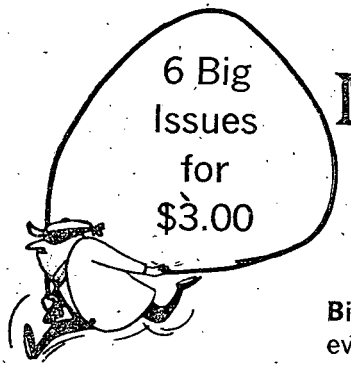

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recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

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The author was 29 when he wrote "How To Break Out of Sing Sing." He had been a writer or editor for the Miami Herald, Miami News, Bahamas News Bureau, Stars & Stripes (Tokyo), United Press (London), Spain's American Weekly, Los Angeles Examiner, and San Francisco Chronicle—so he has been well schooled, and has been around. About the middle of 1963 he sold his schooner in San Francisco "to finance a novel-writing venture, living in a sidewalkless section of Miami called Coconut Grove." The novel, at the time of this reporting, is coming along nicely, thank you . . .

We'll be hearing from Mr. Hardin—he tells us he has "a mental trunk ful of short-story messages all wrapped up in bright-colored packages."

HOW TO BREAK OUT OF SING SING

by ROBERT HARDIN

THE DAY THAT LOOT CAME UP with his plan it was colder than a precinct sergeant's badge in Ossining, New York. Though don't think that's unusual. Ossining's no Miami Beach, and its most famous resort, Sing Sing, where we were wintering, ain't even a dot on an AAA road map.

Loot had found a twig and was scratching the snow in the Main Yard, planning something—which wasn't unusual as Loot is known from Juvenile Hall to Superior Court to be a fast man with a plan. Spider maintained that Loot's plans were the worst since the coach of Cumberland College set his defense against Georgia Tech in 1916 and lost 222 to 0, but of course Spider didn't say it very *loud*. Loot's ears are like radar, especially when insults are being passed out.

Anyway, Spider and I were flapping our arms to keep warm and Otis the Lotus was shadowboxing when Loot looked up. "Eddie, I got it."

Spider sniffed. "The last time you *got* it," he said, "we got one-to-fourteen here." Which was a zippy enough remark, only anyone else but Spider would have checked on it to save himself a kick in the shins.

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I asked politely, "You got the Chemical-Corn Exchange Bank heist figured out?"

"Better," Loot said. "I figured out how to get out of here."

"Aw, gee, Loot, that's swell," Otis the Lotus said warmly. "How?"

"Parole."

Otis' face fell. Parole *sounded* all very well and good, but as I pointed out, the long-established local odds were 9 to 5 that we would get paroled the same year the New York Yankees finished in last place, and that it would be simpler to smuggle in a few small arms, such as anti-tank guns, and blast our way out.

"Did it ever occur to you," Loot said, "just *why* we don't get paroled?"

Well, it don't take no Quiz Kid to answer that one, I said. In '39, our first stretch, we lost out by slugging the assistant warden with a tray in the mess hall, and in '47 we were scratched off when one of Loot's letters was deemed to concern an escape attempt.

"In code, yet," sneered Spider. He was standing farther away now, though it would be better for Spider to send his thoughts to Loot via Western Union. "Last word in each line: 'have—car—ready—at—nine—rod—under—seat.' They say it took the censor all of three minutes to figure that one out. The only code he ever cracked, they say."

Spider was bitter and you could not count everything he said, but it was true that, despite Loot's plans, we tended to spend very long vacations at Sing Sing.

"This plan," Loot said, "is foolproof." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Tomorrow I am going to see the psychiatrist."

"Oh, my," Otis the Lotus said, horrified. "The *witch doctor?*" Otis is a little weak upstairs and mostly about as useful as a hangnail, though once we thought he would be a fine heavyweight only he couldn't lay off the pizzas with anchovies and sausages. But I had to agree that Otis had just about summed up my sentiments.

"The reason we never got out a day early," Loot said patiently to Otis, "is because we never buttered up that witch doctor. Parole is like a horse race, Otis. We're the horses, the witch doctor does the handicapping, and the Parole Board just sits back and plays his selections." Loot glanced around at us. "The key to parole is *rehabilitation.* Do you all know what rehabilitation is?"

I figured that was a pretty silly question. Any Sing Sing guest who hadn't heard about rehabilitation had to be deaf; the warden had a sermon on the subject that he would deliver at the drop of a pickaxe, although in recent years it had become fairly obvious to me that we were too far down on the warden's rehabilitation list to worry about it.

Loot waved the twig like a pro-

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fessor at a blackboard. "Rehabilitation," he said, "is when you con the jerks into thinking you'll go straight."

We all had to admit that the warden never put it quite so simple.

"I am going to become rehabilitated," Loot said, "so I can go out and stick up the Chemical-Corn Exchange Bank. And the witch doctor is going to help me."

Well, I figured I might just grow wings and fly out, but Loot was pleased with his plan and it was getting dark and I was freezing, so I said nothing and we trudged inside. Itchy the guard was glaring and we all knew Itchy would be delighted to make peg board of us, given half an excuse. Itchy wasn't of the Rehabilitation School.

But a week went by and Loot did not mention the witch doctor again, so I figured he saw that no head shrinker would be dumb enough to be conned by somebody named Loot. At night Loot went back to planning the bank heist, and it was quiet except for occasional remarks passing from cell to cell such as "Queen's bishop to king's five." And the scratch, scratch from Otis and Spider's cell. That was Otis. Digging out.

For four years Otis had been digging out. Every six months he would whisper that he had dug another inch and Spider would say, "Keep at it, Otis. Another five, six hunrit years and you're free as a bird." Oh, he was a mouth, that Spider. And lately he had taken to adding, "Anyway, Otis, you'll get out quicker digging than some guys will thinking. Some guys who figure on outsmarting the talking doc. Not naming no names, of course."

It wasn't very funny, especially as it seemed that Loot had given up the idea. Until one night he said, "I'm getting transferred to the library."

"Library?" I said. "Why?"

Loot looked annoyed. "Don't you remember my plan?"

"I do, I do," Otis brayed from the next cell. "I cover the guard at the—"

"Shut up," Loot said. He turned to me. "You remember, Eddie. The rehabilitation."

Yeah, I remembered.

"Conning a talking doc is like robbing a bank," Loot said. "To plan a good job, you need a few diagrams. So I'm transferring to the library. Understand?"

I understood that Loot was asking for nothing but trouble. Most of the guys in the block agreed it didn't add up when Loot left his job bossing the laundry crew to go to work in the library, and Spider even went so far as to say it was the silliest move that Loot made since he paid his income tax in '46.

Pretty soon, books began cluttering up the cell. By and by you couldn't lie down at night for fear of being jabbed by *Psychology Simplified*, or *Psychology of the Criminal Mind*, or *Psychoanalysis*

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and You. I have always been for education, especially for kids under eleven, but definitely not tucked away under the mattresses at Sing Sing, which any guest will tell you don't take no prizes for comfort to begin with.

As the books piled up, Loot began angling to see the talking doc, a young sandy-haired guy with a smile, which went to show you could not spot these guys by looks alone. Pretty soon the two of them were chummier than Cocker Spaniel pups in the same litter, and I was more worried than ever. Loot took to calling his visits with the witch doc "chats."

One day at noon we were standing in the Yard after one of the chats, and Loot said, all pleased with himself, "He likes me."

"Well, ain't that lovely," Spider said. "I'm sure you two will be most happy, one with the other."

I cringed for poor Spider. But Loot only sighed and said, "The trouble with you, Spider, is that your basic neurotic tendencies have left you inadequately prepared to cope with your environment." And he walked away.

Back in the cell that night, I watched Loot real close, because this was a much different Loot than I ever knew before. I guess he knew. "It's really very simple," he said, laying aside *Psychiatry: Illustrative Case Histories.* "Bandying big words about makes the talking doc convinced I'm becoming rehabilitated. So pretty soon he opens the big gate and says, 'So long, Loot. Good luck, fella.' And then I go stick up the Chemical-Corn Exchange Bank."

Perhaps it sounded simple enough to Loot, but I could see that in this horse race he was top weighted and a very poor bet at any odds. Some of these bug doctors, I knew, had gone through college not once but *twice.* And when they found out what Loot was trying to pull it was odds on that they'd give him a tiny room with no windows, far, far away.

You could see the others felt the same way. "Why don't we just get some .38s and shoot our way out?" Otis suggested helpfully.

'Otis," Loot said, "your difficulty is that you rely too heavily on trial and error methods instead of developing an analytical approach to your problems."

Otis shook his head. And you could tell he felt very sad indeed about Loot

It was not two days later that Loot announced the witch doc was sending him to the Sing Sing Mechanics School. Otis the Lotus beamed and said he heard of a guy once who had made a very nice gun out of spare parts, only he'd never been able to make a shell to fit it.

"I am not going to Mechanics School to make guns," Loot explained patiently. "You got to have a trade to get parole, so I am going

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to learn to be a mechanic. After that I can *buy* a rod. Ten bucks in any pawnshop. It don't pay to steal little things."

So Loot went to school. And got stranger and stranger.

When he was not talking about sublimation or regression or something called neurasthenia, he spoke of valve seats or tappets or carburetor adjustments. Otis ventured that if only Spider would help dig, perhaps they could tunnel through in time to save Loot from going completely nuts.

"What you can do to help *me*," Loot said to Otis, "is get me a potato from the kitchen. A nice big Irish potato."

"Well," Otis said with a deep sigh, "okay."

Otis got the potato and Loot played with it like a baseball one whole night in the cell. He'd toss it in the air, catch it behind his back, and then he'd hold it out and squint at it and ask it if Broadway had changed much.

It was enough to make you cry. And it all but scratched poor Loot from our form sheets, but Loot didn't much notice since he hardly spoke to us anyway, spending all his free time in the Yard jawing with the others in Mechanics School. I noticed that he soon appeared to be the top banana, although the grease monkeys were not those I would personally want to be top banana of.

One day word got around that the warden's staff car was on the fritz, real bad, and nobody could locate the trouble. In a few days it was all over stir that the warden was very displeased because the car still wouldn't run, and that new sets of buttonholes were about to be stitched if that sick machine didn't recover, but quick.

Me and Spider and Otis was wondering how all this would affect Loot, when Itchy the guard came shuffling by. Now Itchy is bad news and it ain't nothing but trouble whenever he's got something on that uncrowded mind of his.

"What brings you out into the sunlight, Itchy?" Spider asked. Spider's going to dig his grave with his teeth some day.

But Itchy just smiled. "Ah, fellas," he said, "sure the warden's car is all fixed again. Running just fine, it is. I knew you'd want to know."

"We figured the warden's car would get fixed eventually, Itchy," Spider said, "but we never figured on a civil word from you after all these years. What's the trouble, you just find out your birthday is coming up?"

Itchy ignored Spider as a great smile distorted his face. "And," Itchy said, "I suppose you're wondering who's the hero, who's the one who got it running? Well, it was Loot, that's who. Oh, but the warden is pleased. He's quite a hero, that Loot. Quite a hero. And just started in Mechanics School, too.

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Talked to the warden personally, he did. Just the two of them. And do you know, fellas, I'm certain that if the warden asks, Loot will remember his old pal, Itchy, his friend who has always seen to it that things is run fair and square here. Promotions are due soon, you know. Ah, talked to the warden personal, he did. Quite a hero, Loot is."

And for a time Loot was quite a hero indeed. It was a sight you wouldn't believe to see him puff up and talk about how carbon and hydrogen unite with oxygen in the air to form gases which are quite different in composition from the original fuel mixture, and how it then passes through the exhaust . . .

We listened and shrugged. Loot was cockier than ever.

"Only a matter of time before I get that new three-button suit," he said. "Can you imagine that? Three-button suits. With thin lapels."

"Be careful," I said.

"Aw, the talking doc is eating out of my hand, especially since the warden is so grateful to me for fixing his car."

Well, I could see through Loot like a piece of baloney at the Good Eats Restaurant, and I knew that the witch doctor who couldn't had to be a thick-head indeed, but Loot strutted around and I said nothing. In the next two weeks, though, I could see that something was wrong. Loot stopped strutting and began biting his fingernails and acted more and more like a Turkey at Thanksgiving.

Even Otis the Lotus saw that things must be going bad, but how bad we didn't know until one Friday. We were standing in the Yard after noon chow and the head witch doctor walked up with Itchy.

They took Loot away without a word.

When I got back to the cell that evening, Loot was sitting there. I was surprised to see him at all, but there he was, head hanging, looking sad indeed.

"Can I do anything?" I said.

"No, Eddie. I guess not."

"I am very sorry," I said.

"Me too," he said, not looking up. "I'll miss you guys when I get out. Next week."

My mouth hung open like a tailgate in a loading zone as Loot gee-hawed loudly. "I told you," he said. "No talking doc is smarter than old Loot. No, sir!"

Loot did get sprung, too. About a week later. And what a rush Spider, Otis, and me made to get into Mechanics School. It wasn't too bad, really, if you didn't mind grease. We were fairly bright students, too, although it wasn't until years later that Loot told us how a potato stuffed in the muffler would cause a car not to run and that probably no one would think to look for it. Except, of course, the guy who put it there.

And we started having our own "chats" with the witch doctor. It

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was amazing. Loot was right all the time. Witch doctors are a cinch to con if you just play your cards right, which we did, and it wasn't long before they opened the gate for Spider, Otis, and me.

Loot wrote from Trenton, New Jersey that he had big new plans, and we hooked up with him as soon as we got out. Oddly enough, we never pulled the Chemical-Corn Exchange heist, because we've still got a good thing going in Trenton. If you're ever driving through, you might stop in and see us. We're just on the north edge of town—you can't miss it, there's a big sign that says:

Loot's Square Deal Garage.
24-Hour Service.

"Q"

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Audemars, Pierre	FAIR MAIDS MISSING	Doubleday & Co.	$3.50	1/22
Creasey, John	LOOK THREE WAYS AT MURDER	Charles Scribner's Sons	$3.50	1/22
DuBois, Theodora	THE LATE BRIDE	Ives Washburn	$3.95	1/15
Gilbert, Anthony	THE FINGERPRINT	Random House	$3.95	1/13
Linklater, Erik, Balchin, Nigel, Sykes, Christopher, Forester, C. S.	FATAL FASCINATION	Little, Brown & Co.	$5.00	1/21
Rendell, Ruth	FROM DOON WITH DEATH	Doubleday & Co.	$3.50	1/8
Shannon, Dell	THE DEATH-BRINGERS	Morrow	$3.95	2/3
Tucker, Wilson	A PROCESSION OF THE DAMNED	Doubleday & Co.	$3.50	1/8
Walsh, Thomas	THE TENTH POINT	Simon & Schuster	$3.50	1/8

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE PAPERBACKS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Aarons, Edward S.	ASSIGNMENT—SULU SEA	Gold Medal (Orig.)	40¢	12/31
Atlee, Philip	THE SILKEN BARONESS	Gold Medal (Orig.)	40¢	12/31
Black, Gavin	DEAD MAN CALLING	Dolphin Books	95¢	1/8
Fagyas, M.	THE FIFTH WOMAN	Popular Library	50¢	1/19
Ford, Leslie	THE CLUE OF THE JUDAS TREE	Popular Library	50¢	1/5
Hamilton, Donald	ASSASSINS HAVE STARRY EYES	Gold Medal (Orig.)	40¢	12/31

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a new Minerva Club story

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **VICTOR CANNING**

TITLE: ***A Stroke of Genius***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Lancelot Pike planned a little caper down to the smallest detail. It was really a simple business, and should have worked. But the strangest thing happened . . .*

THE MINERVA CLUB, IN A DISCREET turning off Brook Street, is one of the most exclusive clubs in London. Members must have served at least two years in one of Her Majesty's Prisons and be able to pay £50 a year dues. In the quiet of its Smoking Room, under the mild eye of Milky Waye, the club secretary, some of the most ambitious schemes for money-making, allied of course with evasion of the law, have been worked out. But, although notoriety is a common quality among members, fame—real honest solid fame—has come to few of them.

Lancelot Pike is one of these few but, although he is still a member, he is not often seen in the august halls of the Minerva. However, over the fireplace in the Smoking Room, hangs one of his greatest works—never seen by the general public—a full assembly, in oils, of the Management Committee of the club; it shows thirty figures of men whose photographs and fingerprints are cherished lovingly by Scotland Yard.

Lancelot's road to fame was a devious one and the first step was taken on the day that Horace Head, leaning against a lamppost in the Old Kent Road and reading the racing edition, saw Miss Nancy

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Reeves. Without thinking, Horace began to follow her, some dim but undeniable impulse of the heart leading him. And, naturally, Lancelot Pike, who was leaning against the other side of the lamppost, followed Horace, because he was Horace's manager and was not letting Horace out of his sight.

Horace Head at this time was at the peak of his brief career as a professional middleweight fighter. He was younger then, of course, but still a wooden-headed, slow-thinking fellow with an engaging smile bracketed by cauliflower ears. He was wearing a gray suit with a thick red line in it, a blue shirt, a yellow bow tie, and brown shoes that squeaked.

He squeaked away after Miss Nancy Reeves and there wasn't any real reason why he should not have done so. She was a trim slim blonde with blue eyes and a pink and white complexion that made Horace think —and this will show how stirred up he was—of blue skies seen through a lacing of cherry blossoms. It had been a good many years since Horace had seen real cherry blossoms too.

Lancelot Pike followed him. Lancelot was a tall, slim, handsome, versatile number, with a ready tongue, a fast mind, and a determination to have an overstuffed bank account before he was thirty no matter what he had to do to get it. At the moment, Horace—at one fight a month—was his stake money.

If Miss Nancy Reeves knew that she was being followed, she showed no signs of it. She eventually went up the steps of the neighborhood Art School and disappeared through its doors.

Horace continued to follow. He was stopped inside by an attendant who said, "You a student?"

Horace said, "Do I have to be?"

"To come in here, yes," said the attendant.

"Who," said Horace, "is the poppet in the green coat with blonde hair?" He nodded to where Miss Nancy Reeves was almost out of sight up a wide flight of stairs.

"That," said the attendant, "is Miss Nancy Reeves."

"She a student?" asked Horace.

"No," said the attendant. "She's one of the art teachers. Life class."

"Then make me a student in the life class," said Horace, the romantic impulse in him growing.

At this moment Lancelot Pike intervened. "What the devil are you after, Horace? You couldn't paint a white stripe down the middle of the road. Besides, do you know what a life class is?"

"No," said Horace.

"Naked women. Maybe, men, too. You've got to paint them."

"To be near her," said Horace, "I'll paint anybody, the Queen of Sheba or the Prime Minister, black all over. I got to do it, Lance. I got this sort of pain right under my heart suddenly."

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"You need bicarbonate of soda," said the attendant.

Horace looked at him, reached out, and lifted him clear of the ground by the collar of his jacket and said, "Make me a student."

Well, it had to be. There was no stopping Horace. Lancelot helped to fill out the form and, in a way, he was glad because he knew that the classes would keep Horace away from the pubs between training. Horace was the kind who developed an enormous thirst as soon as training was finished.

So Horace became a student in the life class. It was a bit of a shock to him at first. He came from a decent family of safe crackers, holdup men, and pickpockets. He didn't approve of naked women posing on a stand while a lot of people sat round painting them.

To do him credit, Horace seldom looked at the models. He sat behind his easel and looked most of the time at Nancy Reeves. Naturally he did very little painting—but he saw a lot of Nancy Reeves.

She was a nice girl. She soon realized that Horace was almost pure bone from the shoulders up; but she was a great believer in the releasing power of art, and she was convinced that Horace would never have joined the class if there had not been some deep-buried longing in him for expression.

Now Horace, of course, had not the faintest talent for drawing or painting; but, realizing that he could not sit in the class and do nothing, he would just smack an occasional daub of paint on his canvas in a way that loosely conformed to the naked shape of the model before him. Nancy Reeves soon decided that Horace was—if he was going to be anything—an abstract painter. She would come and stand behind him at times and her talk went straight over his head—but Horace enjoyed every moment of it.

After two weeks of this, Horace finally got to the point of asking her if she would go to a dance with him. Surprisingly, she agreed, and she enjoyed it because, whatever else he was not, Horace was quick on his feet at that time and a good dancer.

Now, a week after the dance, Horace and Lancelot had fixed up a little private business which Lancelot had carefully planned for some time. This was to grab the payroll bag of a local building firm when the messenger came out of the bank on a Friday morning.

Lancelot Pike had the whole thing worked out to the dot. Horace would sit in the car outside the bank, and Lancelot would grab the moneybag as the man came to the bottom of the steps and they would be away before anyone could make a move to stop them. It was a bit crude, but it had the merit of simple directness and nine times out of ten—if you read your papers—it works.

It worked this time—except for one thing. The man came down the steps carrying the bag, Lancelot

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grabbed it and jumped into the car, and Horace started away; but at that moment the messenger shoved his hand through the rear window and fired at Lancelot Pike.

But the gun wasn't an ordinary one. It was a dye gun full of a vivid purple stain. The charge got Lancelot full on the right side of the face, ran down his neck, and ruined a good suit and a silk shirt.

Well, there it was. They got back to the Head house, where Lancelot had a room, without any trouble from the police. Lancelot nipped inside with the moneybag and Horace drove off to ditch the car.

When Horace returned he found Lancelot hanging over the wash basin trying to get the dye off. But it wouldn't budge. It was a good rich purple dye that meant to stay until time slowly erased it.

"You won't be able to go out for a while," said Horace. "Months, maybe. The police will be looking for a purple-faced man."

"Lovely," said Lancelot savagely. "So I'm a hermit. Stuck here for weeks. You know what that's going to do to a gregarious person like me?"

Horace shook his head. He didn't know what a gregarious person was.

"We got the money," he said.

"And can't spend it. Can't put it to work to make more. Cooped up like a prisoner in the Tower. Me, Lancelot Pike, who lives for color, movement, people, the big pageant of life, and golden opportunities waiting to be seized."

"I could go to the chemist and ask him if he's got anything to take it off," suggested Horace.

"And have him go to the police once he's read the story in the evening newspaper!"

"I see what you mean," said Horace.

So Lancelot—very bad-tempered—was confined to his room. For the first few days he kept Horace busy running to and from the public library getting books for him. Lancelot was a talented, not far from cultured type—things came easily to him and idleness was like a poison in his blood that has to be worked out of his system. But it was people and movement that he missed. Every evening Horace had to recount to him all that he had done during the day and, particularly, how he was getting on with Miss Nancy Reeves at the Art School.

Curiously enough, Horace was getting on very well with her. There was something simple, earthy, and engagingly wooden about Horace which had begun to appeal to Nancy Reeves. It happens that way—like calling to unlike . . . think of the number of men, ugly as all get-out, with beautiful wives, or of dumb women trailing around with top intellects.

Anyway, Lancelot began to take a great interest in Horace's romance, and he knew that the time would come when Horace would ask the girl to marry him, and he was

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offering ten to four that she would not accept.

Horace wouldn't take the bet, but he was annoyed that Lancelot should think he had such a poor chance.

"What's wrong with me?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Lancelot. "except that you really aren't her type. To her you're just a big ape she's trying to educate."

"You calling me a big ape?"

"Figuratively, not literally."

"What does that mean ?"

"That you don't have to knock my head off for an imagined insult."

"I see."

"I wonder," said Lancelot. "However, forget it. You ask her and see what answer you'll get."

Meanwhile Lancelot helped Horace with his homework from the Art School. Each week each student did a home study composition on any subject he liked to choose. Lancelot got hold of canvas and paints and went to work for Horace. And then the painting bug hit him—and hit him hard.

He gave up reading books and papers, gave up listening to the radio and watching television, and just painted. It became a mania with him in his enforced seclusion—and it turned out that he was good. He had a kind of rugged, primitive quality, with just a lick of sophistication here and there which really made you stop and look.

Naturally, Nancy Reeves noticed the great improvement in Horace's work and her spirit expanded with delight at the thought that she was drawing from the mahogany depths of Horace's mind a flowering of his true personality and soul. There's nothing a woman likes more than to make a man over. They're great ones for improving on the original model.

Well, one week when Lancelot's face had faded to a pale lilac, Horace came back from the Art School saying that the home study that week had to be "The Head of a Friend," and Lancelot said, "Leave it to me, Horace. Self-portrait by Rubens. Self-portrait by Van Gogh—"

"It's got to be a friend," said Horace. "I don't know no Rubens—"

"Quiet," said Lancelot, and he began to ferret for a canvas in the pile Horace had bought for him. As he set it up and fixed a mirror so that he could see himself in it, he went on, "How's tricks with the delicious Nancy?"

"Today," said Horace, "I asked her to marry me. A couple more good fights and with my share of the wages snatch, I can fix up the furniture and a flat."

"And what did she say?"

"She got to think it over. Something about it being a big decision, a reckonable step."

"Irrevocable step."

"That's it. That's what she said."

"Means she don't believe in divorce. If she says Yes, which she won't, you'll have her for life. When do you get your answer?"

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"End of the week."

"Twenty to one she says No."

"You've lengthened the odds," said Horace, wounded.

"Why not? Deep knowledge of women. When they want time, there's doubt. Where there's doubt with a woman, there's no desire."

"Why should she have doubts? What's wrong with me?"

"You're always asking that," said Lancelot. "Some day somebody is going to be fool enough to tell you. Horace, face it—you're no Romeo like me. I've got the face for it."

"I love her," said Horace. "That's enough for any woman."

Lancelot rolled his eyes. "That anyone could be so simple! A man who has only love to offer is in the ring with a glass jaw. Now then, let's see." He studied himself in the mirror. "I think I'll paint it full face, kind of serious but with a little twinkle, man of the world, knowing, but full of heart."

Well, by the end of the week the self-portrait was finished and Horace took it along to the school. He set it up on the easel and pretended to be putting a few finishing touches to it. When Nancy Reeves saw it she was enraptured.

"It ain't," said Horace, who had learned enough by now to play along with art talk to some extent, "quite finished. It needs a something—a point of . . . well, of something."

"Yes, perhaps it does, Horace. But you'll get it."

She put a hand gently on his shoulder. They were in a secluded part of the room. "By the way, I've come to a decision about your proposal. It's better for me to tell you here in public because it will keep it on a calm, sane, level basis—a perfect understanding between two adult people who considered carefully, very carefully, before making an important decision. I feel that by producing in you this wonderful flowering of talent that I've completed my role, that I have no more to give. Marriage after this would be an anticlimax, since my attachment to you is really an intellectual and artistic one, rather than any warm, passionate, romantic craving. I know that you will understand perfectly, dear Horace."

"You mean, no go?" asked Horace.

Nancy nodded gently. "I'm sorry. But for a woman, love must be an immediate thing. There must be something about a man's face that is instantly compelling. Now take this painting of yours—there's a man's face that is full of the promise of romance, of tenderness and yet manly strength. I'd like to meet your friend."

For a moment Horace sat there, the great fire of his love just a handful of wet ashes. That Nancy Reeves could go for Lancelot just by seeing his portrait filled Horace with bitterness—a bitterness made even blacker by the fact that Horace had taken Lancelot's bet at twenty to one, and now stood to lose £100.

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"You mean," said Horace, "that you could go for him?"

"He's certainly got a magic. You've caught his compulsive personality and—"

"You should really see him," said Horace jealously. "One-half of his face is as purple as a baboon's—well, like this—"

In a fit of pique, Horace picked up his brush, squirted some purple paint onto his palette, and slapped the purple thickly over the right side of Lancelot's face.

From behind him Nancy Reeves's voice said breathlessly, "But Horace—that's just the defiant abstract touch it needed! The unconventional, the startling, the emphatic denial of realism . . . Horace, it's staggering! Pure genius. Don't do a thing more to it—not another stroke!"

Horace stood up, looked at her, and said, "There's a lot more I could do to it. But if you like it so much—keep him. Call it 'A Painter's Goodbye.' "

He walked out and he never went back to Art School again.

A week later, while Horace was sitting dejectedly in Lancelot's room watching him work at a painting, the local Detective-Inspector and a Constable walked in unexpectedly.

The Inspector nodded affably and said, "Hello, Horace. Evening, Lance. Forging old masters, eh?" He was in a good mood.

Horace gave him a cold stare, and Lancelot kept his hand up to his face to cover his pale lilac cheek.

The Inspector went on, "Funny—I never connected you two with that wages snatch. Bit out of your line. Thought it was strictly an uptown job."

He leaned forward and looked at the painting on which Lancelot was working. "Nice. Nice brushwork. Fine handling of color. Bit of a dabbler myself. Bitten by the bug, you know. Great relaxation. Go to all the exhibitions. They had one at the Art School yesterday. Picked up this little masterpiece by Horace Head."

The Constable stepped forward and brought from behind him Lancelot's self-portrait with Horace's purple-cheeked addition.

"Fine bit of work," said the Inspector. "Sort of neo-impressionistic with traces of nonobjective emotionalism, calculated to shock the indifferent into attention. It did just that to me—so you can take your hand away from your cheek, Lance, and both of you come along with me."

And along they went—for a three year stretch.

But it didn't stop Lancelot painting. He did it in prison and he did it when he came out. Gets 500 guineas a canvas now, and his name is known all over the country.

But he's not often in the Minerva Club. His wife—who was a Miss Nancy Reeves—doesn't approve of the types there and rules the poor fellow with a rod of iron.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	JAMES M. ULLMAN
TITLE:	*The Mysterious Mr. Smith*
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVES:	Michael Dane James and Ted Bennett
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*A new industrial-detective and business-espionage story, and perhaps the best one so far—because it packs a remarkable amount of mystery plot in 6000 words . . .*

AS TED BENNETT REACHED FOR THE door of his Chicago motel room, the telephone rang. Bennett put down his bag, picked up the phone, and heard Michael Dane James say from New York, "Ted? You haven't turned in your rental car, I hope."

"I'm about to." Bennett, a tall lean business espionage agent, pushed back the brim of his hat, exposing a hank of sandy hair. "I gave our client enough evidence to convict those patent thieves. And my flight back to Manhattan leaves in an hour."

"Well, another client has a problem. Since you're nearby, I want you to drive to Milwaukee. At noon you'll meet a passenger at the airport there. He'll be flying in from Balsam, Michigan."

"Balsam? Isn't that where your pal Hiram Tyree has one of his companies?"

"Yes—The Happy Homes Corporation, a manufacturer of prefabs. Hiram's son Bill is executive vice-president, and he'll be on the plane—he's the one you're to meet. And tomorrow, Leo Regan, the sales manager, will join you in Milwaukee. You're to investigate Joe Smith, a salesman who just sold one million dollars worth of Happy Homes."

"Sounds to me like instead of investigating him, they should promote him."

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"They would, except for one thing. Happy Homes never heard of Joe Smith."

Max Conrad, owner of one of Milwaukee's larger home-building firms, leaned back and asked incredulously, "You mean Joe Smith doesn't work for you fellows?"

"I'm afraid not." Bill Tyree, executive vice-president of Happy Homes, managed a rueful smile. In his late twenties, he was clean-cut, pink-cheeked, and slim. "We've never had a salesman named Joe Smith on our payroll."

The builder shook his head. "No wonder your people acted so strange when I telephoned about our big deal this morning. But it doesn't make sense!—a man spending his time and energy selling for a company that doesn't employ him."

"That," Bennett said, "is why I'm here. I want to learn who Joe Smith is, and what he's up to."

"I can imagine. But first, let me explain. In all my life I've never built a prefab house. I've been throwing out prefab salesmen for so long they hardly ever come around any more. Then a good friend of mine, Sam Loomis, built a subdivision with Happy Homes and did real well. I studied every angle of Sam's deal, and I liked what I saw. But I didn't say anything to you guys because I hadn't made up my mind completely. I even kept quiet at the builder's convention in Miami last month, where I got some of your promotional stuff at your trade show booth. And then, four days ago, this Joe Smith walked into my office."

"What did he look like?"

"Medium height. In his thirties. Good build, dark hair, a flat nose, as though someone had busted it once. He carried a briefcase and said that he was from Happy Homes, that he just wanted to introduce himself. Well, I admired that—his having the guts to make a call even though I'd been bouncing guys from his company for years.

"Then he asked if I had your new color brochure, and I said yeah, I'd picked one up at the convention booth. Then he went into a mild little spiel. He was low-pressure and kind of personable. He seemed to know all about Happy Homes, and even mentioned the names of some of your executives.

"While he was talking, I made the decision. I said, 'Forget all that. I know your houses. Just tell me one thing. Can you give me the same deal you gave Sam Loomis?' That took him by surprise. He said, 'Yeah, I guess so, sure.'

" 'In that case,' I said, 'you've just earned yourself a big commission. I'll use Happy Homes in a subdivision I'm starting next fall. Before it's finished, I'll put up more than one hundred homes, and it'll mean a gross of a million bucks to your company. Get some of your top brass up here tomorrow and we'll start hammering out the details.' "

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"How did this Smith react?"

"He seemed to be floored, but that was understandable. When he'd recovered, he thanked me all over the place. He promised to have a crew of executives up from Balsam in the morning and then he left. I thought he sort of left in a hurry, but I figured he was just excited. I began to wonder, though, when I didn't hear from him again, and when Happy Homes didn't contact me either. So this morning I called you."

"I hope," young Tyree said, "the experience hasn't soured you on our firm. I can assure you—"

The builder chuckled. "That's okay. I'm still willing to negotiate. But I warn you: when we *do* talk business, I think now I'll hold out for an even better deal than you gave Sam Loomis."

Michael Dane James walked briskly into a tall building in New York's financial district. It was late the same afternoon. The business espionage consultant wore a heavy fur-collared overcoat to shield him from the bitter January wind. In his fifties, he was broad-shouldered and tending to plumpness, with horn-rimmed glasses riding his pug nose.

James took an elevator to the top floor and was ushered into the office of Hiram Tyree, founder and president of half a dozen corporations, all of which kept James on retainer. Tyree, lean and gaunt, nodded but did not rise.

James pulled up a chair and said, "Hiram, it's a stumper. Smith must have had *some* reason for posing as a Happy Homes salesman. And I doubt if he'd go through all that trouble unless it was part of some criminal scheme."

"My son just called. He wondered if Conrad hadn't invented the story—to panic us into making concessions in the deal we're going to negotiate. Conrad does have a reputation as a shrewd eccentric."

"Don't count on that. After Bennett left Conrad and your son, he rented a room and called about twenty Milwaukee builders—to see if Joe Smith visited anyone else. So far, Bennett found four other builders who saw Joe Smith. Like Conrad none of those four others is putting up prefabs now. And the pattern never varies. Smith shows up unannounced. He hangs around until the builder finally asks him into his office. Smith's standard opener is to ask if the builder has the latest Happy Homes color brochure. Except for Conrad, none did. Then Smith gives them a brochure, delivers an innocuous good-will talk, and leaves."

"Maybe he'll visit every Milwaukee builder who doesn't use prefabs."

"I doubt it." James lit a cigar. "A couple builders he did visit had non-prefab competitors right across the street, and Smith didn't call on *them*. He's quite selective. Obviously, the men he visited had some-

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thing else in common. So Bennett phoned Conrad and read off the four other names. Conrad thought a while and said yes, there was one thing they all had in common—all five had attended a builder's convention in Miami last month. The whole Wisconsin delegation stayed at a hotel called the Tropica."

"That's funny," said Hiram Tyree. "As you know, we had a booth at the convention trade show. But we also maintained a hospitality suite—in the Tropica Hotel."

"Uh-huh. It looks more and more as though the Miami convention is our link. At any rate, Bennett will get a list of all convention delegates from Wisconsin first thing in the morning. You know much about that convention, Hiram?"

"I was there. I didn't stay for all of it, but my son Bill, his sales manager Leo Regan, and some other people from Balsam did."

"Anything out of the ordinary happen?"

Tyree hesitated. Then he said, "Yes. I don't know the details because I'd already left for New York. But I understand the police came to the Tropica the last day of the convention and asked a lot of questions."

"What about?"

"A girl—a model who worked in another hospitality suite on our floor. The night before—that was a Wednesday—she fell to her death from a window of her apartment in Miami. The police seemed to think someone from the convention may have been in the apartment at the time. But I hardly see how that could be related to Joe Smith."

"Probably not. But we'd better check it out."

Ten minutes later, after Tyree had left to take a private plane to Balsam, James telephoned a friend in Miami.

The facts, briefly, were these: the girl, Bette Moore, was found dead in an alley behind her apartment house, six miles from the Tropica Hotel. The cause of death was a fall from her fourth-floor window. A sudden thunder squall had hit Miami late that night and her fall had not been heard by other tenants in the building.

Earlier in the day she had worked in a Tropica Hotel hospitality suite maintained by the Build-Aluminum Company, a storm door and window manufacturer based in Newark, New Jersey. From evidence in the girl's apartment—cigarette butts unmarred by lipstick, a bottle, and two glasses half filled with liquor—police surmised she had been entertaining a man. Their thoughts turned immediately to the convention because Bette Moore's husband, who proved he had been out of town the night she died, had once been linked to a blackmail ring preying on conventioneers. However, a canvass of the Tropica Hotel failed to turn up any leads.

James drove to Newark the next

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morning. Build-Aluminum's promotion manager, Pete O'Garr, had been in charge of the firm's hospitality suite. Young, short, and prematurely bald, O'Garr waved James to a chair.

"I hoped I'd heard the last of Bette Moore. Believe me, the publicity we got from *that* incident was murder."

James sat down. "No doubt. But as I told you on the phone, strange things have been happening to Happy Homes lately. There may possibly be a connection."

"I remember the Happy Homes suite. It was at the end of the hall. But our suite was quite a long way from theirs. Ours was right up near the elevator bank."

"You have any contact with the Happy Homes people?"

"Just a nodding acquaintance. Old man Tyree was in and out of their suite early in the convention. I saw his son Bill a few times too, and I've been running into Leo Regan, their sales manager, for years. We'd say hello in the hall, but didn't have any conversations to speak of."

"What about Bette Moore?"

"I couldn't spend much time watching her. And don't get the wrong idea. Bette was a prop, that's all. A lot of companies hire models at conventions—to pass out samples and whatnot. Still . . ." O'Garr drummed his fingers on his desk. ". . . I had doubts about Bette from the start. Her main job was to attract attention. That was easy. She wore tights and black mesh hose and attracted plenty of attention. She was a blonde, tall and long-stemmed. In addition, I wanted her to take pictures. We bought an instant-picture camera,"—O'Garr nodded to a camera on a shelf behind James—"that one there. Bette was supposed to snap important prospects while they were in our suite, and give them the picture as a souvenir to take home. Just a gimmick—but gimmicks make a prospect remember you."

"What prompted those doubts you mentioned?"

"We opened our suite on Sunday afternoon. But I wanted the model there Saturday, so I could brief her on her duties. Bette showed up in a dress so tight she could hardly breathe. Her whole attitude indicated she had the wrong notion about us. I put her straight in a hurry. I said, 'Look, honey, we like to sell doors and windows, but not that way. We're strictly legit, and so is every other exhibitor at this convention. If you get out of line with even one of my prospects, you're fired, and I'll run this suite without a model.' "

"How did she take it?"

"Apparently, like a trooper. She smiled and said, 'Okay, where's the camera?' She'd never handled a camera like that before. I told her to take it home, read the instructions, and practice with it. When she returned on Sunday afternoon, she used the camera like an expert.

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She seemed to behave, too. When a few guys tried to make passes at her later in the week, she brushed them off."

"On Wednesday—the night she died—how late was your suite open?"

"We closed early. That was the night of the big Convention Ball. Bette left the suite at about seven. The next I heard of her was when the police knocked at my door in the morning." Humorlessly, O'Garr smiled. "I couldn't help much. All the police had to go on were some fingerprints on a glass in Bette's apartment, but they couldn't print every man who'd visited our suite. Anyhow, the convention broke up on Thursday afternoon and we all went home."

"Any Wisconsin delegates on your floor?"

"No, they were upstairs. Personally, Mr. James, I thought the cops were wasting their time prowling around the hotel. I think they made a mistake when they released Bette's husband, Alec Moore. But they claim he had an ironclad alibi, that he was visiting a sister in Pensacola. Just a minute, I saved the newspaper clippings."

O'Garr rummaged in a drawer. "Her husband was a well-educated guy, apparently, but a bad actor. He served a jail term once for extortion. Before that, he worked off and on as a salesman. After jail, he held a number of odd jobs, but always seemed to have more money than he earned. He wasn't living with Bette any more, but the cops figured he and Bette were running some kind of a shakedown racket—the old badger game. Here."

O'Garr handed James a clipping. A photograph alongside the news story showed Alec Moore emerging from a police station. Of medium height, he was in his thirties, with dark hair and a curiously flattened nose.

Alec Moore, unmistakably, was Joe Smith.

By the time James relayed the news to Bennett in Milwaukee, Bennett had run up an imposing telephone bill. Based in a room in a Milwaukee hotel, Bennett was getting impressive results by calling names on a list of convention delegates. It soon became clear that Moore, in his role as Joe Smith, was working from an identical list. The only names Moore skipped were those of builders already dealing in prefab houses.

Moore had visited the last Milwaukee-area delegate three days before. Bennett spread a map of a Wisconsin on his desk and called builders to the south, along Lake Michigan and near the Illinois line. Moore had seen those fellows even before coming to Milwaukee. Then Bennett tried Madison. Moore had been there just one day before—at the very time Bennett and young Tyree had been talking to Max Conrad.

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Bennett paused for a sip of coffee. A rap sounded on his door.

The man who walked into the room was white-haired and ruddy of complexion. "I'm Regan," he announced. "Leo Regan, sales manager for Happy Homes." Regan sat on a bed. "I just got in. Incidentally, Bill Tyree and I are flying back to Balsam tonight. But before I join him at that builder Conrad's office, I wanted a talk with you. How's it going?"

"Not bad. I traced your phony salesman to Madison. I think he'll go north from there."

"I talked to old man Tyree a few minutes ago. Apparently, your Mr. James thinks Smith is the husband of the girl who fell out the window in Miami."

"He's positive."

Regan frowned. "I don't like the sound of that. I hope you're being discreet in the way you question people. The girl's death was the talk of the convention, and we can't afford to involve our company in any scandal."

"I'm afraid Moore has already involved you." Bennett lit a cigarette. Cautiously, he ventured, "You recall seeing any of the men from your suite talk to the girl?"

"Hell no. We didn't have time. People have the wrong idea about what goes on at a trade convention. To us, managing that hospitality suite was just a lot of hard work. Young Tyree did manage to get to the hotel swimming pool once, but even then he took some business papers along to study. If you think it's easy to be on your feet all day, having business talks where one wrong word can ruin a sale, try it sometime. By Wednesday night we were all bushed."

"You closed the suite early?"

"As early as we could—to make an appearance at the Convention Ball. Then Bill Tyree and the others headed back to the hotel to sack in. I spent a couple more hours treating some good customers to a late floor show. Some fun!"

"Who roomed in the suite?"

"Bill and I had rooms adjoining it. The others roomed on another floor. Old man Tyree was on our floor, but he returned to New York on Wednesday afternoon." Regan paused. "I gather you have a good reason for asking that question."

"Let's face it. Moore is remarkably well-informed on the Happy Homes Corporation. He must be getting information and sales literature from someone."

The phone rang, and Ted answered. He said, "Oh, yes, good of you to call back. I'm with Happy Homes. We're trying to locate one of our salesmen, a man named Joe Smith. Has he visited your office yet? When? I see. Thanks."

Bennett hung up and reached for his coat. "Sorry, I'll have to leave. That was a builder in Beaver Dam. Moore was waiting outside his office at nine this morning, and he never made his first visit earlier than

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ten before. All of a sudden he's in a big hurry."

Regan rose. "You're driving to Beaver Dam?"

"No, he's long gone by now. I'm heading farther north—to the cities around Lake Winnebago. I'm gambling Moore and I should reach there about the same time."

Bennett drove north on a four-lane, divided highway that wound gently over rolling Wisconsin farmland. Snow covered the fields but the pavement was clear and dry. A little before four o'clock he parked in the business district of Oshkosh, a city at Lake Winnebago's midpoint.

From a public phone booth Bennett began calling builders. He learned Moore had finished in Fond du Lac by noon and made his last Oshkosh visit at three, just one hour before Bennett's arrival. Bennett was getting closer to his quarry.

Bennett dialed a builder in Neenah, at the northern end of the lake.

"Happy Homes? Say, what's wrong with you people? One of your men was here just half an hour ago."

"Joe Smith?"

"Yeah, and he really burned me up. He brushed right by my secretary and wanted to know do I have one of your color brochures. I said no, I've already seen one, and please go away. Then he asks *where* I saw the brochure. I said a friend and I walked into your suite in Miami and my friend picked one up. Your man asks, who was the friend? I said what's the difference? Your man got real sore and I think he would have socked me. I said okay, don't flip, it was Pete Runnion, but personally I think you're the lousiest salesman I ever met, and the company that hired you must be nuts."

"I'm sorry he was rude," Bennett said. "Confidentially, I don't think he'll be working for us much longer."

Bennett hung up and glanced at his list. A Pete Runnion lived in a small resort town about 50 miles to the northwest. Bennett tried Runnion's office but nobody answered. The operator said Runnion maintained another office in his home.

Bennett went back to his car. The mercury in a thermometer hanging on a store front hovered at a mere ten below zero. Bennett wheeled out of town and into lengthening shadows, trying to recall what the Happy Homes color brochure looked like. The one he had seen in Conrad's office was made up of clear plastic sleeves in a loose-leaf binder. Each sleeve contained two color prints of Happy Homes models, inserted back to back. The prints were easy to pull out of the sleeves, in case you wanted to read the technical and price data that was printed on their reverse sides.

It was dark when Bennett reached Runnion's town. He angle-parked in

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a cluster of cars pulled up before a tavern on the two-block Main Street. Inside, about a dozen men were watching television at the bar.

The bartender came over and Bennett said, "I'm looking for Pete Runnion."

"You too? Turn right at the food store on the corner. Pete lives in the second house on the right."

Bennett went back outside, rounded the corner, and rang Runnion's bell. The man who answered was short and elderly. "Hello. But I'm afraid—"

"My name's Bennett. I'm a special agent for Happy Homes." Bennett stepped into the living room. "I'm looking for a man who calls himself Joe Smith. He's posing as one of our salesmen, but he's an imposter."

"He left a few minutes ago." Runnion shook his head. "What kind of identification do *you* have? I don't trust anyone any more."

Bennett produced the proper papers. Runnion studied them. "All right. Smith was waiting at the door when I got home. I was ice-fishing. In this town my business is dead this time of year."

"What did Smith want?"

"He asked if I had a Happy Homes brochure. I thought that strange, his coming all this way at night just for that. But I said yes, and he asked to see it. He claimed some brochures distributed at the convention had typographical errors and he wanted to be sure mine was correct. I said it didn't matter, I'd already decided not to build prefabs.

"He kept insisting, so I found my brochure and handed it to him. He poked inside and said, 'Yeah, this has the prices all wrong. I'll leave you a correct one.' He dropped another brochure on the table and walked out with mine. And that's all there was to it."

Bennett excused himself and hurried back to Main Street. Except for taverns, a drug store was the only business still open. The pharmacist, lounging behind his register, enjoyed a good view of the street.

Bennett entered the drug store. "Pardon me, but in the last five minutes did you see a stranger pull away in a car?"

"Sure did. He just took off toward Oshkosh in a green, two-door Ford sedan." Bennett started back out and the druggist added, "He was a peculiar fella."

Bennett paused. "What do you mean?"

"He came in here looking real pleased. He bought some stamps and an envelope and sat down to address the envelope. While he was doing that, I remember I glanced out the window and saw you run out of the tavern and around the corner. This fella walked out and then I guess he mailed the envelope. The next I noticed him, he was poking under the hood of a car. The funny thing was, though, when he closed the hood, he didn't get into *that* car. He got into the green Ford."

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"Which car was he tinkering with?"

The druggist pointed to Bennett's car.

James, hunched at a phone in his Scarsdale home, heard Bennett's report and then said, "Well, you might as well spend the night in that burg. You probably won't be able to replace the fuel pump that Moore smashed until morning anyhow."

"There's still a chance the police could catch him."

"No, we're not in a position yet to made the story public. Anyway, by the time you managed to explain to the local constabulary why we want to talk to that man, he'd be clear out of the state. Did you have another talk with Runnion?"

"Yes. He said he picked up the brochure the Sunday the convention opened. He and his pal from Neenah went to the Happy Homes suite about noon. A hotel caterer was inside setting up the bar. The caterer told Runnion the Happy Homes people were all downstairs eating lunch, but Runnion said that was okay, he just wanted some literature to study back in Wisconsin if he ever decided to build prefabs. Runnion saw the brochure on a coffee table and took it. Then he and his friend left."

"Well, it's obvious that brochure was what Moore has been looking for. He won't make any more calls. Incidentally, I've been doing some research on him. Among other things, two thousand dollars appeared in his checking account last month as if by magic."

"Mickey, it occurs to me—"

"Me too. I'll research a certain other bank account first thing in the morning. Meanwhile, I'll pack a bag and get out to the airport. I won't get much sleep, but I'll arrive in Balsam before tomorrow morning's mail is delivered."

Hiram Tyree clasped his hands on the desk and frowned. "Moore wanted that particular brochure, then. The one Runnion took from our suite."

"Exactly." James, seated in Tyree's Balsam office, puffed on a cigar. Bill Tyree and Leo Regan were ranged on a sofa. "His salesman pose gave him a perfect excuse to ask a builder if he had one of your brochures, and if he had one, where he had obtained it. How else could Moore find out without exciting suspicion? He certainly couldn't burglarize all the non-prefab builders on that list of Wisconsin delegates. And in case several builders had picked up brochures in your suite, Moore was ready with a story about typographical errors. That gave him an excuse to look inside the brochures—to be sure he'd found the one he was looking for."

"Look inside for what?"

"You know how those brochures are made up—two color prints, back to back, in each plastic sleeve. I think Moore was looking for some-

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thing shoved out of sight between two prints. It would have to be something flat and small. And what does that suggest? Bette Moore was taking instant pictures. They were flat and small. Let's assume Bette took a picture that someone didn't want seen. And that someone had shoved the picture between two prints—to hide it."

Leo Regan shook his head. "I don't understand. If a man wanted to conceal a photograph, why wouldn't he just slip it into his pocket?"

"Why indeed? Unless he didn't have a pocket." James turned to Bill Tyree. "You were the only man from the Happy Homes suite who found time to go to the hotel swimming pool. If Bette Moore photographed you in bathing trunks you wouldn't have had any pockets. But you brought some business material along, which probably included a brochure. When did you take that swim, Bill?"

"The day we arrived. Saturday. But—"

"The same day Bette Moore left the Build-Aluminum suite with the camera, and took it home to learn to use it."

"Just a minute, " Hiram Tyree snapped. "Mickey, you can't—"

"I'm sorry, Hiram. But ask your son why he withdrew two thousand dollars from a Balsam bank account the day before Moore deposited exactly the same sum to an account in Miami. Ask Bill to show us the contents of an envelope marked 'Personal,' and now being delivered to his desk with his other morning mail—an envelope mailed last night from the town where Runnion lives. I saw that envelope in your mailroom half an hour ago. And if Bill wants to disprove the charge you all know I'm about to make—ask him to forward his fingerprints to the Miami police—so they can compare them with those found in Bette Moore's apartment."

Tyree looked at his son. "What about that?"

Bill Tyree started to say something. Then he changed his mind, gazed at the floor, and said, "He's right. I was the man with Bette Moore."

Young Tyree fumbled for a cigarette, avoiding his father's eyes. "I saw her in the hall that Saturday. I was going to the swimming pool; she'd just walked out of the Build-Aluminum suite with the camera. While waiting for the elevator, we got to talking. I guess I started it. She said she was a model and she was supposed to learn how the camera worked. I said there was no trick to it, I could show her in five minutes.

"She took the pool elevator down with me. There's a landscaped area near the pool. I demonstrated the camera and we talked some more. Before she left, she took my picture. Then she wrote her name, address, and phone number on the back of it."

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She gave me the picture and said, 'Look, here's where I live. I'd be fired if you told anyone about this. But when the convention's wrapped up Wednesday night, maybe you'd like to relax a little. Just call in advance, and we'll go to some out-of-the-way spots I know.' "

Young Tyree paused. "Mr. James deduced what happened. I didn't want anyone to see the picture, with her name and address on the back. I should have known better, but I'd decided to go out with her Wednesday night. I was wearing only trunks and a shirt with a very small pocket, so I hid the picture between the two prints in a brochure. Later, at the suite, I left the brochure on a coffee table. I thought it would be safe there until we opened the suite.

"But when we got back from lunch on Sunday the brochure was gone. I slipped out and found the caterer who had been in the suite; he told me two guys had walked in, and one of them had taken the brochure. He didn't remember their faces but he recalled the conversation, so I knew the man was a Wisconsin builder who wasn't using prefabs now. Well, I didn't like the possibility of his coming across the picture one day, but it didn't seem a serious matter—then."

Bill Tyree puffed on his cigarette. "Bette and I didn't exchange words all week. But the way I looked at her when I passed her suite, she knew I'd call Wednesday night. And I did, when I returned early from the Ball. Her number was in the phone book. I went to her apartment and she was dressed to go out, but she said let's have a drink first. We had several. We were both a little light-headed. A big wind came up and it thundered, and I started going around the apartment, closing windows.

"Bette laughed, kicked her shoes off, and said now we'd have to stay there and have another drink, that she didn't want to go out in the rain. She got up to help me with the windows, and was reaching down toward that window in the living room when she stumbled on a loose throw-rug and plunged right through the screen. I guess I'm the only one who heard her cry out. I'll never forget that cry . . ."

"And you," Hiram Tyree said, "ran away."

"I ran down to the alley, but she was already dead. I knew how it would look—Hiram Tyree's son in the room with that girl. I went back to the hotel. Nobody had seen us together, and I thought I'd be safe. I didn't remember the brochure until the next morning. I realized then that if the Wisconsin builder ever found the picture and mailed it to the Miami police, I'd be in trouble."

"When," James asked, "did Moore approach you?"

"A week later, here in Balsam. He said he knew I'd been in the apartment, because Bette had told him about her Wednesday night date

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with me. Obviously, they were planning some sort of shakedown. Moore said he really didn't care how Bette had died, but that if I didn't give him a lot of money, the police would learn I'd been in the apartment, and they could prove it with my fingerprints.

"I told Moore about the photograph and said, 'Look, if that builder ever finds it, I'll be exposed anyhow, so why should I pay you?' Moore said, 'Okay, give me a couple of thousand as expense money and I'll try to get that picture back in your hands. If I can do it, then you pay me off in full.' I agreed.

"We worked out the fake salesman scheme. We figured Moore could hit every non-prefab delegate in the state, if necessary, in two weeks at the outside. With any luck he'd have the brochure back before Happy Homes ever heard of him, if it ever did. Then Conrad took Moore off-guard with his million-dollar deal. We hoped Conrad would lose patience and forget about Happy Homes. But when he called, I managed to reach Moore in Madison the night before last to warn him about James and Bennett.

"Moore said he'd get an early start and try it one more day. He just did get the picture. He mailed it immediately, because he didn't want to risk being caught with it on him." Bill looked at his father. "I suppose," he added, "I'll have to tell the Miami police about this."

"I'm afraid," Tyree agreed grimly, "you will."

Leo Regan parked in the lot at the Balsam airport, where a Happy Homes private plane was waiting to take James back to New York.

"I can't say," Regan drawled, "that I'm pleased with the way this turned out. But at least you solved our mystery."

"If young Tyree is telling the truth about what happened in that apartment, he probably won't go to prison. There'll be a scandal, of course, but he's young enough to live it down. It won't be so easy for Moore, though. He'll be arrested and tried for blackmail."

"I still think you jumped to a pretty big conclusion when you decided Bill was the man involved with Bette Moore."

James reached for the door. "It wasn't such a big jump. Moore's actions yesterday—his early call, his rudeness to the Neenah builder—made it obvious he knew someone was on his trail. Later, he recognized Bennett's car on the street and disabled it to delay pursuit. But how did he know the kind of car Ted was driving? Only one man involved in the investigation had seen Ted drive that car—Bill Tyree, when Ted picked him up at the Milwaukee airport. And the only reason Tyree would cooperate with a blackmailer like Moore would be that he was being blackmailed himself."

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When Anthony Boucher was Editor of "The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction," he reprinted Edgar Allan Poe's "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (F&SF, issue of March 1958). Here is Mr. Boucher's editorial introduction:

"It was Avram Davidson who suggested that this relatively little-known Poe story (from 'Godey's Lady's Book,' April, 1844) deserved exhumation; and I'm sure you'll agree. It's an odd and individual story even in Poe's variegated canon. So shrewd a critic of Poe as Philip Van Doren Stern classifies it among 'Tales of Fantasy,' along with 'William Wilson' and 'Eleonora'; but another interpretation is possible. More on this after you read the story . . . and try to see why I believe it belongs rather among Poe's tales of ratiocination and science fiction."

A TALE OF THE RAGGED MOUNTAINS

by EDGAR ALLAN POE

DURING THE FALL OF THE YEAR 1827, while residing near Charlottesville, Virginia, I casually made the acquaintance of Mr. Augustus Bedloe. This young gentleman was remarkable in every respect, and excited in me a profound interest and curiosity. I found it impossible to comprehend him either in his moral or his physical relations. Of his family I could obtain no satisfactory account. Whence he came, I never ascertained. Even about his age—although I call him a young gentleman—there was something which perplexed me in no little degree. He certainly *seemed* young—and he made a point of speaking about his youth—yet there were moments when I should have had little trouble in imagining him a hundred years of age.

But in no regard was he more peculiar than in his personal appearance. He was singularly tall and thin. He stooped much. His limbs were exceedingly long and emaciated. His forehead was broad and low. His complexion was absolutely bloodless. His mouth was large and flexible, and his teeth were more wildly uneven, although sound, than I had ever before seen teeth in a human head. The expression of his smile, however, was by no means unpleasing, as might be supposed; but it had no variation whatever. It was one of profound melancholy—of a phaseless and unceasing gloom.

His eyes were abnormally large, and round like those of a cat. The pupils, too, upon any accession or diminution of light, underwent contraction or dilation, just such as is

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observed in the feline tribe. In moments of excitement the orbs grew bright to a degree almost inconceivable; seeming to emit luminous rays, not of a reflected, but of an intrinsic lustre, as does a candle or the sun; yet their ordinary condition was so totally vapid, filmy, and dull, as to convey the idea of the eyes of a long-interred corpse.

These peculiarities of person appeared to cause him much annoyance, and he was continually alluding to them in a sort of half explanatory, half apologetic strain, which, when I first heard it, impressed me very painfully. I soon, however, grew accustomed to it, and my uneasiness wore off. It seemed to be his design rather to insinuate than directly to assert that, physically, he had not always been what he was—that a long series of neuralgic attacks had reduced him from a condition of more than usual personal beauty, to that which I saw.

For many years past he had been attended by a physician, named Templeton—an old gentleman, perhaps seventy years of age—whom he had first encountered at Saratoga, and from whose attention, while there, he either received, or fancied that he received, great benefit. The result was that Bedloe, who was wealthy, had made an arrangement with Doctor Templeton, by which the latter, in consideration of a liberal annual allowance, had consented to devote his time and medical experience exclusively to the care of the invalid.

Doctor Templeton had been a traveller in his younger days, and, at Paris, had become a convert, in great measure, to the doctrines of Mesmer. It was altogether by means of magnetic remedies that he had succeeded in alleviating the acute pains of his patient; and this success had very naturally inspired the latter with a certain degree of confidence in the opinions from which the remedies had been educed. The Doctor, however, like all enthusiasts, had struggled hard to make a thorough convert of his pupil, and finally so far gained his point as to induce the sufferer to submit to numerous experiments.

By a frequent repetition of these, a result had arisen, which of late days has become so common as to attract little or no attention, but which, at the period of which I write, had very rarely been known in America. I mean to say, that between Doctor Templeton and Bedloe there had grown up, little by little, a very distinct and strongly marked *rapport*, or magnetic relation. I am not prepared to assert, however, that this *rapport* extended beyond the limits of the simple sleep-producing power; but this power itself had attained great intensity.

At the first attempt to induce the magnetic somnolency the mesmerist entirely failed. In the fifth or sixth he succeeded very partially, and after long-continued effort. Only at

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the twelfth was the triumph complete. After this the will of the patient succumbed rapidly to that of the physician, so that, when I first became acquainted with the two, sleep was brought about almost instantaneously, by the mere volition of the operator, even when the invalid was unaware of his presence. It is only now in the year 1845, when similar miracles are witnessed daily by thousands, that I dare venture to record this apparent impossibility as a matter of serious fact.

The temperament of Bedloe was, in the highest degree, sensitive, excitable, enthusiastic. His imagination was singularly vigorous and creative; and no doubt it derived additional force from the habitual use of morphine, which he swallowed in great quantity, and without which he would have found it impossible to exist. It was his practice to take a very large dose of it immediately after breakfast, each morning—or rather immediately after a cup of strong coffee, for he ate nothing in the forenoon—and then set forth alone, or attended only by a dog, upon a long ramble among the chain of wild and dreary hills that lie westward and southward of Charlottesville, and are there dignified by the title of the Ragged Mountains.

Upon a dim, warm, misty day, towards the close of November, and during the strange *interregnum* of the seasons which in America is termed the Indian Summer, Mr. Bedloe departed, as usual, for the hills. The day passed, and still he did not return.

About eight o'clock at night, having become seriously alarmed at his protracted absence, we were about setting out in search of him, when he unexpectedly made his appearance, in health no worse than usual, and in rather more than ordinary spirits. The account which he gave of his expedition, and of the events which had detained him, was a singular one indeed.

"You will remember," said he, "that it was about nine in the morning when I left Charlottesville. I bent my steps immediately to the mountains and, about ten, entered a gorge which was entirely new to me. I followed the windings of this pass with much interest.

"The scenery which presented itself on all sides, although scarcely entitled to be called grand, had about it an indescribable, and to me, a delicious aspect of dreary desolation. The solitude seemed absolutely virgin. I could not help believing that the green sods and the gray rocks upon which I trod, had been trodden never before by the foot of a human being. So entirely secluded, and in fact inaccessible, except through a series of accidents, is the entrance of the ravine, that it is by no means impossible that I was indeed the first adventurer—the very first and sole adventurer who had ever penetrated its recesses.

"The thick and peculiar mist, or

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smoke, which distinguishes the Indian Summer. and which now hung heavily over all objects, served, no doubt, to deepen the vague impressions which these objects created. So dense was this pleasant fog that I could at no time see more than a dozen yards of the path before me. This path was excessively sinuous, and as the sun could not be seen, I soon lost all idea of the direction in which I journeyed.

"In the meantime the morphine had its customary effect—that of enbuing all the external world with an intensity of interest. In the quivering of a leaf—in the hue of a blade of grass—in the shape of a trefoil—in the humming of a bee—in the gleaming of a dew-drop—in the breathing of the wind—in the faint odors that came from the forest—there came a whole universe of suggestion—a gay and motley train of rhapsodical and immethodical thought.

"Busied in this, I walked on for several hours, during which the mist deepened around me to so great an extent, that at length I was reduced to an absolute groping of the way. And now an indescribable uneasiness possessed me—a species of nervous hesitation and tremor. I feared to tread, lest I should be precipitated into some abyss. I remembered, too, strange stories told about these Ragged Hills, and of the uncouth and fierce races of men who tenanted their groves and caverns. A thousand vague fancies oppressed and disconcerted me—fancies the more distressing because vague. Very suddenly my attention was arrested by the loud beating of a drum.

"My amazement was, of course, extreme. A drum in these hills was a thing unknown. I could not have been more surprised at the sound of the trump of the Archangel.

"But a new and still more astounding source of interest and perplexity arose. There came a wild rattling or jingling sound, as if a bunch of large keys—and upon the instant a dusky-visaged and half-naked man rushed past me with a shriek. He came so close to my person that I felt his hot breath upon my face. He bore in one hand an instrument composed of an assemblage of steel rings, and shook them vigorously as he ran. Scarcely had he disappeared in the mist, before, panting after him, with open mouth and glaring eyes, there darted a huge beast. I could not be mistaken in its character. It was a hyena.

"The sight of this monster rather relieved than heightened my terrors—for I now made sure that I dreamed, and endeavored to arouse myself to waking consciousness. I stepped boldly and briskly forward. I rubbed my eyes. I called aloud. I pinched my limbs. A small spring of water presented itself to my view, and here, stooping, I bathed my hands and my head and neck. This seemed to dissipate the equi-

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vocal sensations which had hitherto annoyed me. I arose, as I thought, a new man, and proceeded steadily and complacently on my way.

"At length, quite overcome by exertion, and by a certain oppressive closeness of the atmosphere, I seated myself beneath a tree. Presently there came a feeble gleam of sunshine, and the shadow of the leaves of the tree fell faintly but definitely upon the grass. At this shadow I gazed wonderingly for many minutes. Its character stupefied me with astonishment. I looked upward. The tree was a palm.

"I now arose hurriedly, and in a state of fearful agitation—for the fancy that I dreamed would serve me no longer. I saw—I felt that I had perfect command of my senses—and these senses now brought to my soul a world of novel and singular sensation. The heat became all at once intolerable. A strange odor loaded the breeze. A low continuous murmur, like that arising from a full, but gently-flowing river, came to my ears, intermingled with the peculiar hum of multitudinous human voices.

"While I listened in an extremity of astonishment which I need not attempt to describe, a strong and brief gust of wind bore off the incumbent fog as if by the wand of an enchanter.

"I found myself at the foot of a high mountain, and looking down into a vast plain, through which wound a majestic river. On the margin of this river stood an Eastern-looking city, such as we read of in the Arabian Tales, but of a character even more singular than any there described. From my position, which was far above the level of the town, I could perceive its every nook and corner, as if delineated on a map.

"The streets seemed innumerable, and crossed each other irregularly in all directions but were rather long winding alleys than streets, and absolutely swarmed with inhabitants. The houses were wildly picturesque. On every hand was a wilderness of balconies, of verandahs, of minarets, of shrines, and fantastically carved oriels. Bazaars abounded; and in these were displayed rich wares in infinite variety and profusion—silks, muslins, the most dazzling cutlery, the most magnificent jewels and gems. Besides these things were seen, on all sides, banners and palanquins, litters with stately dames close-veiled, elephants gorgeously caparisoned, idols grotesquely hewn, drums, banners, and gongs, spears, silver and gilded maces.

And amid the crowd, and the clamor, and the general intricacy and confusion—amid the million of black and yellow men, turbaned and robed, and of flowing beard, there roamed a countless multitude of holy filleted bulls, while vast legions of the filthy but sacred ape clambered, chattering and shrieking, about the cornices of the mosques,

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or clung to the minarets and oriels. From the swarming streets to the banks of the river there descended innumerable flights of steps leading to bathing places, while the river itself seemed to force a passage with difficulty through the vast fleets of deeply-burthened ships that far and wide encumbered its surface.

"Beyond the limits of the city arose, in frequent majestic groups, the palm and the cocoa, with other gigantic and weird trees of vast age; and here and there might be seen a field of rice, the thatched hut of a peasant, a stray temple, a gypsy camp, or a solitary graceful maiden taking her way, with a pitcher upon her head, to the banks of the magnificent river.

"You will say now, of course, that I dreamed; but not so. What I saw —what I heard—what I felt—what I thought—had about it nothing of the unmistakable idiosyncrasy of the dream. All was rigorously self-consistent. At first, doubting that I was really awake, I entered into a series of tests, which soon convinced me that I really was.

"Now, when one dreams, and, in the dream, suspects that he dreams, the suspicion *never fails to confirm itself*, and the sleeper is almost immediately aroused. Thus Novalis errs not in saying that 'we are near waking when we dream that we dream.' Had the vision occurred to me as I describe it, without my suspecting it as a dream, then a dream it might absolutely have been, but, occurring as it did, and suspected and tested as it was, I am forced to class it among other phenomena."

"In this I am not sure that you are wrong," observed Dr. Templeton, "but proceed. You arose and descended into the city."

"I arose," continued Bedloe, regarding the Doctor with an air of profound astonishment, "I arose, as you say, and descended into the city. On my way I fell in with an immense populace, crowding, through every avenue, all in the same direction, and exhibiting in every action the wildest excitement. Very suddenly, and by some inconceivable impulse, I became intensely imbued with personal interest in what was going on. I seemed to feel that I had an important part to play, without exactly understanding what it was.

"Against the crowd which environed me, however, I experienced a deep sentiment of animosity. I shrank from amid them, and, swiftly, by a circuitous path, reached and entered the city. Here all was the wildest tumult and contention. A small party of men, clad in garments half Indian, half European, and offered by gentlemen in a uniform partly British, were engaged, at great odds, with the swarming rabble of the alleys. I joined the weaker party, arming myself with the weapons of a fallen officer, and fighting I knew not

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whom with the nervous ferocity of despair.

"We were soon overpowered by numbers, and driven to seek refuge in a species of kiosk. Here we barricaded ourselves, and, for the present, were secure. From a loophole near the summit of the kiosk I perceived a vast crowd, in furious agitation, surrounding and assaulting a gay palace that overhung the river. Presently, from an upper window of this palace, there descended an effeminate-looking person, by means of a string made of the turbans of his attendants. A boat was at hand, in which he escaped to the opposite bank of the river.

"And now a new object took possession of my soul. I spoke a few hurried but energetic words to my companions, and, having succeeded in gaining over a few of them to my purpose, made a frantic sally from the kiosk. We rushed amid the crowd that surrounded it. They retreated, at first, before us. They rallied, fought madly, and retreated again.

"In the meantime we were borne far from the kiosk, and became bewildered and entangled among the narrow streets of tall overhanging houses, into the recesses of which the sun had never been able to shine. The rabble pressed impetuously upon us, harassing us with their spears, and overwhelming us with flights of arrows. These latter were very remarkable, and resembled in some respects the writhing creese of the Malay. They were made to imitate the body of a creeping serpent, and were long and black, with a poisoned barb. One of them struck me upon the right temple. I reeled and fell. An instantaneous and dreadful sickness seized me. I struggled—I gasped—I died."

"You will hardly persist *now*," said I, smiling, "that the whole of your adventure was not a dream. You are not prepared to maintain that you are dead?"

When I said these words, I of course expected some lively sally from Bedloe in reply; but, to my astonishment, he hesitated, trembled, became fearfully pallid, and remained silent. I looked towards Templeton. He sat erect and rigid in his chair—his teeth chattered, and his eyes were starting from their sockets. "Proceed!" he at length said hoarsely to Bedloe.

"For many minutes," continued the latter, "my sole sentiment—my sole feeling—was that of darkness and nonentity, with the consciousness of death. At length there seemed to pass a violent and sudden shock through my soul, as if of electricity. With it came the sense of elasticity and of light. This latter I felt—not saw. In an instant I seemed to rise from the ground. But I had no bodily, no visible, audible, or palpable presence.

"The crowd had departed. The tumult had ceased. The city was in comparative repose. Beneath me lay my corpse, with the arrow in my

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temple, the whole head greatly swollen and disfigured. But all these things I felt—not saw. I took interest in nothing. Even the corpse seemed a matter in which I had no concern. Volition I had none, but appeared to be impelled into motion, and flitted buoyantly out of the city, retracing the circuitous path by which I had entered it.

"When I had attained that point of the ravine in the mountains, at which I had encountered the hyena, I again experienced a shock as of galvanic battery; the sense of weight, of volition, of substance, returned. I became my original self, and bent my steps eagerly homewards—but the past had not lost the vividness of the real—and not now, even for an instant, can I compel my understanding to regard it as a dream."

"Nor was it," said Templeton, with an air of deep solemnity, "yet it would be difficult to say how otherwise it should be termed. Let us suppose only, that the soul of the man of today is upon the verge of some stupendous psychal discoveries. Let us content ourselves with this supposition. For the rest I have some explanation to make. Here is a water-color drawing, which I should have shown you before, but which an unaccountable sentiment of horror has hitherto prevented me from showing."

We looked at the picture which he presented. I saw nothing in it of an extraordinary character; but its effect upon Bedloe was prodigious. He nearly fainted as he gazed. And yet it was but a miniature portrait—a miraculously accurate one, to be sure—of his own very remarkable features. At least this was my thought as I regarded it.

"You will perceive," said Templeton, "the date of this picture—it is here, scarcely visible, in this corner—1780. In this year was the portrait taken. It is the likeness of a dead friend—a Mr. Oldeb—to whom I became much attached at Calcutta, during the administration of Warren Hastings. I was then only twenty years old.

"When I first saw you, Mr. Bedloe, at Saratoga, it was the miraculous similarity which existed between yourself and the painting which induced me to accost you, to seek your friendship, and to bring about those arrangements which resulted in my becoming your constant companion. In accomplishing this point I was urged partly, and perhaps principally, by a regretful memory of the deceased, but also, in part, by an uneasy, and not altogether horrorless curiosity respecting yourself.

"In your detail of the vision which presented itself to you amid the hills, you have described, with the minutest accuracy, the Indian city of Benares, upon the Holy River. The riots, the combats, the massacre, were the actual events of the insurrection of Cheyte Sing,

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which took place in 1780, when Hastings was put in imminent peril of his life. The man escaping by the string of turbans was Cheyte Sing himself. The party in the kiosk were sepoys and British officers, headed by Hastings. Of this party I was one, and did all I could to prevent the rash and fatal sally of the officer who fell, in the crowded alleys, by the poisoned arrow of a Bengalee. That officer was my dearest friend. It was Oldeb. You will perceive by these manuscripts," (here the speaker produced a notebook in which several pages appeared to have been freshly written) "that at the very period in which you fancied these things amid the hills, I was engaged in detailing them upon paper here at home."

In about a week after this conversation the following paragraphs appeared in a Charlottesville paper:

"We have the painful duty of announcing the death of MR. AUGUSTUS BEDLO, a gentleman whose amiable manners and many virtues have long endeared him to the citizens of Charlottesville.

"Mr. B., for some years past, has been subject to neuralgia, which has often threatened to terminate fatally; but this can be regarded only as the mediate cause of his decease. The proximate cause was one of especial singularity. In an excursion to the Ragged Mountains, a few days since, a slight cold and fever were contracted, attended with great determination of blood to the head.

"To relieve this, Dr. Templeton resorted to topical bleeding. Leeches were applied to the temples. In a fearfully brief period the patient died, when it appeared that, in the jar containing the leeches, had been introduced, by accident, one of the venomous vermicular sangsues which are now and then found in the neighboring ponds. This creature fastened itself upon a small artery in the right temple. Its close resemblance to the medicinal leech caused the mistake to be overlooked until too late.

"N.B. The poisonous sangsue of Charlottesville may always be distinguished from the medicinal leech by its blackness, and especially by its writhing or vermicular motions, which very nearly resemble those of a snake."

I was speaking with the editor of the paper in question, upon the topic of this remarkable accident, when it occurred to me to ask how it happened that the name of the deceased had been given as Bedlo.

"I presume," said I, "you have authority for this spelling, but I have always supposed the name to be written with an *e* at the end."

"Authority? No," he replied. "It is a mere typographical error. The name is Bedlo with an *e*, and I never knew it to be spelt otherwise in my life."

"Then," said I mutteringly, as I

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turned upon my heel, "then indeed has it come to pass that one truth is stranger than any fiction—for Bedlo, without the *e*, what is it but Oldeb reversed? And this man tells me that it is a typographical error."

At the end of *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains* Mr. Boucher wrote:

"It is possible for a detective story to contain no detective save the reader, as in Thomas Burke's classic *The Hands of Mr. Ottermole*; and it is my suggestion that this, like virtually every other type of detective story, was invented by Edgar Allan Poe . . .

"You will observe these clues: that the entire story of Oldeb and Benares rests upon only two pieces of evidence, both produced by Templeton—the scarcely visible date on the portrait and the 'freshly written' manuscript account; that Bedloe's appearance, according to him, has changed greatly with the years, but the portrait is identical with him today, not at the period when Templeton claims to have been struck by the 'miraculous similarity'; that Templeton offers no reason why, for 'many years,' he never displayed the portrait or said, 'You remind me of my old friend Oldeb'; and, most significant, Templeton happens to be carrying on his person the vital evidence of portrait and manuscript *before* he has heard Bedloe's story.

"Motive for the murder of a wealthy young man by his only intimate is not hard to imagine. I suggest that Doctor Templeton saw in the local sangsue an admirable weapon, but feared possible suspicion from such acquaintances as the narrator. He therefore devised a tale which, with its writhing black venom, would cast an atmosphere of the supernatural around the sangsue and deter the narrator (whose impressionability he had nicely gauged) from probing further. By his Mesmeric skill, he implanted the tale in Bedloe's mind, along with the command that he would forget it until he beheld it as a vision on his mountain walk.

"Poe has succeeded brilliantly in the difficult trick of letting the reader discover facts of which the narrator is not aware; he has once again created a new kind of detective story; and he has, with striking science-fictional anticipation, extrapolated the possibilities of Mesmerism and written the first murder by posthypnotic suggestion."

EDITORIAL POSTSCRIPT: In a letter to your Editors, written on publication of *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains* in F&SF, Mr. Boucher wrote:

"I think maybe I've made an important new discovery in Poeana

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. . . I have the modest feeling this is my brightest critical aperçu."

Indeed Mr. Boucher's instinctive and critical insight has produced an important revelation in Poeana and in the detective story!

And yet your Editors have some reservations and counterthoughts . . . So to round out the tale of Mr. Boucher's discovery and to give you material for meditation and bricks-and-mortar for theory building, we now quote from your Editors' reply to Mr. Boucher's letter:

"Strangely enough, I had no deep feeling of recollection while reading *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains*. Surely I must have read it many years ago, when I devoured Poe; and now, on rereading, I experienced only an occasional glimmer of recall . . .

"Your theories are ingenious and certainly worth the most serious consideration. But I do have some doubts (and my reactions, as they progress in this letter, will not be altogether serious, as you will see). For one thing, I do not find the evidence of your clues completely convincing: (1) it is possible that Templeton could see a basic facial resemblance between the old portrait and Bedlo—even, as the Doctor phrased it, a 'miraculous similarity' and even though his patient's appearance had changed greatly with the years; (2) Templeton does offer a reason for not having shown the portrait—'which I should have shown you before, but which an unaccountable sentiment of horror has hitherto prevented me from showing'; you may not be impressed with the Doctor's reason, but it is a reason and it is given in the story; and (3) Templeton's having on his person both the portrait and the manuscript may have been an important contributing reason why Bedlo experienced his 'psychal discovery'—in other words, Templeton's possession of the portrait and manuscript *led to*, through his mesmeric domination of Bedlo, the 'psychal' experience.

"Ingenious as your theories are—and attractive as they are to my 'detective story mind'—I lean to the 'fantasy' explanation; that is, I prefer to believe (note the word 'prefer') that Bedlo is an 'extension,' so to speak, of Oldeb—that they are the *same person* in (what do you call them?) different time folds.

"And I have reasons to believe this.

"But before I give them, a few words about the spelling of Bedlo's name. I agree with the narrator that the spelling 'Bedlo' was not a typographic error. The real error was in the man's adding an 'e' to his true name. In the early and middle Nineteenth Century, variant spellings of family names were quite common. For example, you will recall that the accused murderers, William and Archibald Trailor, who were once defended by lawyer Abraham Lincoln, had quite a

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few different spellings of their surname in the public print simultaneously—Trailor, Trailer, Traylor, etc. I would suggest that Bedlo (to use the correct spelling) misinterpreted a flourish or curlycue on an old family signature, misreading Bedlo as Bedloe, or that he simply preferred a longer spelling.

"In any event, Bedlo (without the 'e') is, so far as I am concerned, the correct spelling.

"Now, if Oldeb and Bedlo were the same person in different time folds, what was Oldeb-Bedlo's next reincarnation? To quote Sir Thomas Browne through Poe himself, this is a question which, 'although puzzling is not beyond *all* conjecture.' If Bedlo was an 'extension' of Oldeb, of whom was Bedlo the 'precursor' or 'progenitor'?

"And now you will understand why I 'prefer' the fantasy explanation: for Bedlo, in my view, was undoubtedly the immediately preceding incarnation of—hold on to your eyebrows—Sherlock!

"Confirmations? Yes, indeed, to wit:

"(1) the name Bedlo itself—and now you see why that must be the correct spelling: Bedlo has two syllables—as in Sherlock; Bedlo has the e-o vowel combination—as in Sherlock (for reference, see pages 4-5, 'The Great O-E Theory,' in IN THE QUEENS' PARLOR by E.Q.).

"(2) Bedlo was 'singularly tall and thin'—an exact quotation from Poe's story; note all three words in relation to Sherlock: singularly, tall, thin. Further, Bedlo's forehead was broad, his complexion absolutely bloodless, etc. —the child is father to the man. Further still, Bedlo's 'imagination was singularly vigorous and creative.'

"and (3) Bedlo was an habitual user of morphine—naturally, the tolerance in Bedlo grew to the extent that a change in drug became necessary for Sherlock.

"So, if your theories *are* correct, Poe not only created another kind of detective story (making the reader the detective), and, as you say, 'with striking science-fictional anticipation, extrapolated the possibilities of Mesmerism,' he has also anticipated Sherlock Holmes, the character himself, in basic name, physical appearance, drug addiction, etc.!

"It reminds me of a holograph letter signed A Conan Doyle which is part of the Ellery Queen Collection now at The University of Texas: in it Doyle wrote, 'I omitted to say in my note that I owe much, as you say, to Poe . . .'"

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A story with an unusual background . . . about Windy Winter, a famous TV comedian, who was not exactly scrupulous about stealing jokes and gags, and about Ed Parsons who promised the TV comic the absolutely impossible . . .

THE GAG OF THE CENTURY

by WILLIAM BANKIER

IT WAS NOT GOING TO BE EASY TO get to see Windy Winter. Ed Parsons told himself this as he left his office under cover of a dental appointment and whizzed down in the elevator to the lobby. But walking across town through sun-drenched, shopper-filled streets, he argued silently that to see the great Windy Winter he would fight his weight in koodoos. Which was only about 122 pounds of koodoo, a fair match for a small but determined writer. With an envelope full of good comedy material.

Yes, it *is* good material, one of Ed's internal voices said. Then another voice, weary from persistent reasoning, filled his mind with the well-worn argument that Windy Winter is one of the top TV comics in the business. Writers he has. Material he has. Guys with funny scripts approach him in an unending parade, twelve abreast, all blowing their own horns. He is blind to their sight gags. He is deaf to their one-liners. When they drone their monologues, he yawns. What in the world could Ed Parsons expect, joining this March of Sure Rejection?

And suddenly there he was outside the converted legitimate theater which had become illegitimate in the minds of many because it now housed a live television studio. And not a studio devoted to the production of Agony, A Dramatic Reading for Seven Actors and Seventy Commercials, but a place squared away for one hour of boffs with Windy Winter and his weekly Funarama.

Ed tiptoed through the lobby where a man mopped ammonia-fragrant water across the marble floor and stepped into the cool, echoing semidarkness of the theater.

He was in luck: a break of some kind had freed technicians and performers who were sitting in clutches, chattering and drinking coffee from paper cups. There sat Windy Winter on the edge of the stage, his stubby legs hanging not so much down as straight out, his right hand poking holes in the air with ten inches of dead cigar as he talked it up to the laughing men and women who hov-

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ered and darted about him like all the world's bees around the world's last flower.

Okay now, Ed told himself; he'll always have a crowd around him. Don't hand your stuff to somebody else. Talk only to him, to the Big Man himself. Make an impression.

Then, clutching the big brown envelope with the smudgy pages inside, Ed forced himself to stride down the aisle out of the safe, anonymous shadows to interrupt the bright conversation of reality.

"Mr. Winter," he said, and at the thin cry of his voice the group turned and threatened him with silence. He cleared his throat and finished the sentence. "I have some material for you."

"Well, take it away and make me a suit."

Boffo! The gang hardeharred and Winter turned his head slowly, absorbing the sound like sunlight. "Speaking of material," he went along with the gag, "that's great stuff you're wearing. You should have a suit made out of it."

Hoo ha! The gang opened ranks and sucked Ed in to where Windy could get at him better. "Don't look so unhappy, kid. If patch pockets ever come back, you're in."

Ed grinned in spite of himself. He heard the hostility in Winter's voice, saw it flickering in the famous round face capped with the prematurely gray hair combed straight down, the head that was the delight of TV-page cartoonists across the continent.

But Ed Parsons sensed that he had come within range of a permanent radiation emanating from Windy Winter's core. It was not directed at him, personally. He didn't mind it. He could live with it.

"I'm a writer, Mr. Winter," he said.

"You say you're a writer? How'd you like to be my head writer?"

"I'd like it."

"Okay. Write me a new head." Yahoo! from the gang. "This one hurts." Wee wee wee wow! They broke up into pieces, falling back from their master like the petals of a carnivorous plant.

Ed extended the envelope. "I brought these gags I hoped you'd take a look at."

Windy took the envelope. "You say this is a gag?"

"I think so." Ed ignored the confusion inside his head.

"Okay, let's find out. Sheila, bring me that fat little mouth of yours."

Not just Sheila's mouth was fat. She was a light heavyweight stuffed into the ballet practice suit of a welterweight. She slopped across the stage, leaned over, made eyes at Windy Winter, and pursed her voluptuous lips. Windy twisted the envelope into a crumpled roll and jammed it into the girl's mouth. She held it the way Rover holds a bone. The gang screamed.

"He's right," Winter said after

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the first volley, "it is a gag. Best gag we ever had around here. Eh, mouth?" Sheila tossed a proud head, shifted her toothy grip, and pranced into the wings, her black tights flashing knees high. She got applause.

"And if that doesn't shut her up," Windy concluded, "I'll get my lawyer to phone her." They could hardly laugh any more, but somehow they did.

When Winter had twisted the envelope (and the work-smudged pages inside) Ed felt an abrupt shifting inside himself, as though his tough little skeleton was pushing its way through to the surface while everything soft about him sank inward and collected in a dank pool. Turning, he fled up the aisle into the cool shadows.

Back at his office, Ed found solace in the simple purity of commercial advertising. There was something clean and honest about the challenge of writing an ad. Here is a product. It is good. People can use it to their advantage. Think it through; tell them what the benefits are. Be concise. Be interesting. Be informative. Be fun.

Ed cranked paper into his typewriter and began getting some ideas down where he could see them, argue with them, change their shape. And gradually he relaxed.

By five o'clock he had earned his day's wages and Ed made for the street. The sun was down behind the buildings, but it broke through a canyon here and there and threw a massive arrow of gold above the hurrying people.

Ed walked for two and a half hours, stopping once for a stand-up hamburger and grape drink, once for a stand-up hot dog and papaya juice. Now he felt like beer. Luke's Bar, very cool after the heat of a hundred streets, sold him beer in damp bottles.

Ed decanted these, one after another, into a plump glass with a slender stem that made a pleasant connection between his fingers and his lips. He hooked his heels on a rung of the bar stool. He poured beer down his throat. The calves of his legs tingled. He was more relaxed than ever.

And then that thief Windy Winter began to spout his material.

It was true. Luke had tuned in the TV set above the bar and there was the famous comedian, his show in progress. The sound warmed in with a burst of laughter from the studio audience. The cigar went stab, the round head ducked and bobbed in movements of wry cynicism, the quick eyes darted aside, gauging the reaction, timing the next line. Then the broad mouth opened.

And Ed Parsons, sitting in Luke's Bar, knew what Windy Winter was going to say.

And Windy said exactly that. And the studio audience roared.

Then Ed, not knowing whether to cheer or call a cop, silently

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mouthed the next line. Like an echo, Winter delivered it and the audience responded with laughter.

Ed finished his beer in the two minutes it took the comic to conclude that portion of his show. Then he paid his tab and left the bar, walking fast.

They were milling around inside when he got to the theater. Most of the studio audience had gone back to their hotels or to their bus tours or to whatever occupied their time when they were not laughing at Windy Winter. A few had remained to pester the Big Man for autographs and personal insults that they could take home and treasure.

Ed bided his time on the edge of the group. Then, when Winter turned and headed for a side exit, Ed brushed past the people and grabbed the man's arm.

"You used my material," Ed said.

The way Winter peered into his eyes and smiled, Ed knew he remembered him. "Who are you?" the comic said.

"This morning. The envelope of gags you put in the girl's mouth. I heard you do a few minutes of my stuff on tonight's show."

Winter took out a gold lighter and snapped a flame to the end of his cigar. "You look a little different," Windy Winter said. "Your face is wet."

"I want to know why you used my material without telling me. I want you to use it but you should have told me. I had my name and phone number on the envelope."

"Your envelope made me tired this morning and it still does. Shut up about your envelope." The comic turned and took a step away. Ed followed close. Winter turned back and they collided. "Get away, will you? Look, kid, here's a couple of messages. We get your kind every week. Not a show goes by but what you phony writers come out of the wall or the woodwork to cry on my shoulder."

"You used my material."

"That's what they all say. I've heard it so often I'm going to put it to music. Give me a rhyme for material, other than venereal, and I'll do it right now. We'll record it and make a million bucks. Kid, my monologues are put together by my writers and me. We work all the time on them, week in and week out, right smack up to show time. I tell a thousand gags, and some of them sound like yours. Forget it."

"Somebody stole my stuff. Between two and three minutes of it. I heard every line."

The comedian's face clouded. He bit into his cigar, aimed it dead center between Ed's eyes, and sighted along it. Backstage, Sheila flitted between flats, her giant shape clad in a duster cut from a tropical print. Her voice ripped through the postshow rumble in a shaft of arrogance. "I'm almost dressed. Where is he?" At the sound, Winter's eyes tightened as with pain and he pulled

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his head away from something that seemed to hold it in an unbreakable grip.

"Kid, I explained," he said. "But I guess I wasted my time."

Ed looked up beyond the cigar, directly into the twin green fires that smoldered within pits of dark, eroded slag. Heavy lids came down slowly and raised again, and Ed noticed a change in the fires. They flickered, as though to indicate that the fuel supply was low.

"I don't know what else to say," Ed said.

"You don't know what else to say? Try saying this. Say goodbye."

For two days following their second meeting, Ed Parsons thought about the fat shape of the middle-aged comic as he struggled over the edge of the stage and hurried to meet his big, loud chorus girl named Sheila.

On the third day pity evaporated and was replaced by righteous indignation. Whoever was at fault, his material *had* been used on the air. The gags were good. The audience had enjoyed them. In short, the Windy Winter Funarama owed Ed Parsons. Owe, they did. Pay, they would. When and how, Ed knew not.

It was at lunch eaten at his desk that Ed decided to telephone Windy Winter. After all, he had an "in" of sorts. Why not make use of it?

He dialed the network and got the number of the studio where Funarama was in rehearsal. Then he dialed the studio and asked for Winter.

"He can't come to the phone," a man barked.

"Tell him it's the guy who wrote last week's show," Ed said.

"Really!" But the bark gave way to silence, then returned with warmth and charm to say, "Hold on, won't you?" Ed held on.

After an interval in which Ed was able to chew a mouthful of sandwich 27 times without approaching swallowing consistency, Windy Winter came on the phone and yelled, "What do you want?"

"Well, I figured we've got this relationship started and I might as well get something out of it."

"Don't waste my time."

"I won't. Listen, would you say there is such a thing as a truly original gag?"

"You called me to discuss the History of Humor?"

"It's important. Have you ever heard a gag that was one hundred per cent original?"

"There's no such thing. The new gags are all switches. Give my boys the time and we could find it in our files."

"I'm glad that's your answer because now I will write you a completely new joke. For your show."

"What's one joke? I use fifty of them a week."

"But this one will be one hundred per cent original. There's never been

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such a thing—you said so yourself."

Winter greeted this line of reasoning with thoughtful silence. Then he said, "You've got this gag worked out?"

"I'm going to write it."

"When you have it, bring it to me."

"And you'll use it?"

"If it's good, sure I'll use it."

So Ed Parsons said goodbye and finished his lunch in a half dream wondering how in the world he would write a joke that had never been heard before.

Then he set to work. Which is to say, he gave his mind over to the process of creation. Stage One was free dreaming. Pursuing this method, he walked the streets till late hours, sat in bars with crowds of strangers who ignored the young man crouching alone, reading his beer, nodding to himself, and smirking or frowning alternately.

Or he wandered into the park, sat on a bench, and stared intently at a tired woman who had come out with her old sweater on to hold the sleepy head of her reclining child. Ed watched her as though something she and her thumb-sucking child might do would lead him to the gag of the century, and when she became nervous under his gaze and began turning her head in search of a cop, he got up and walked toward the lake. But he didn't find anything new there either.

After two days of this dreaming, Ed put his elbows on his desk, took his forehead in one hand and a pen in the other, and began writing words on a thick yellow pad. His wrist and fingers began to ache, his forehead became numb, his handwriting turned into broken wavy lines, and the pages piled up like dry leaves.

He wrote of strange birds that walked into restaurants and demanded to see the manager; of a man whose hat brim was loaded with potato salad which, strangely, contained no mayonnaise; of dear hearts and mental people who lived and loved in his home town.

Some of the lines made him smile when he read them over later. But nowhere was there a truly original gag. He was merely writing switches. Updating old-old material. Just like everybody else.

Then the dreaming and the scribbling ended and it was the morning of the next Windy Winter show. Still playing it by ear, Ed phoned his copy supervisor and asked for a one-hour leave of absence to see a sick friend. He locked the door of his room-and-a-half and walked across town to the theater. Backstage, he found Winter spitting on the floor in front of the orchestra leader.

"And I can still taste those lyrics," the comic yelled. "Write it so it's me, Gino—*me*! Don't ask me to sing that junk."

The orchestra leader arched his back and stalked away. A stage-

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hand passed a broom over the wet boards. Ed stepped up to the comic and said, "You expectorate very high tonight."

"Is that the new joke?"

"It's no joke at all."

"Give that man the Diogenes Award. Where's that one hundred per cent original gag you promised me?"

Ed said the only thing left for him to say. "I couldn't write it."

Winter's face seemed to pale. Then he bit the end off a new cigar and said, "Of course you couldn't. I must be nuts to think you could. A funny little guy comes to me and says he can produce the only original gag in the world. So I stand around waiting for him to squeeze out this mythical boff. Take away my shoelaces, I might hang myself."

Then Ed got his idea. "Wait a minute, Mr. Winter," he said. "I just thought of it. There *is* something you could do."

That evening Ed took his usual place in front of the TV at Luke's Bar. And there was Windy Winter, trotting through a narrow opening as the curtains closed on a production number, getting a laugh by pretending the heavy draperies had pinched his behind, then doubling the laughter by allowing his left arm, for no reason, to retreat up into the sleeve of his jacket. He looked comical doing it, Ed had to admit, so that was probably reason enough.

"A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theater." Windy twisted his neck and poked his cigar to show that he was coming to something. "This kookie little guy came up to me and told me he had written a completely new joke. Now I may not know what I like, but I know jokes. And believe me, there is no such thing as a new joke. But this little guy says he has one and I asked him to bring it here tonight. And here he comes now."

A short man wearing a straw hat, horn-rimmed glasses, and a loud, oversized sports jacket hurried onstage carrying a folded sheet of paper. Ed did a mild double-take: Winter had chosen the actor and costumed him using Ed Parsons himself as a model.

"Okay," Winter said, glowering at the actor, then turning and flickering his eyebrows at the camera. "You bring me that all-new joke?"

The actor stood silent, round-shouldered, meek. He handed the sheet of paper to Windy. The comic unfolded it with great deliberation.

"This is guaranteed absolutely original?" The actor nodded.

Winter scanned the page, his lips forming silent words, his eyes squinting. The people in the audience held their breath. Winter fumbled in his breast pocket, still squinting, and took out a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. He slipped them on. They were identical with those worn by the actor. The audience groaned in appreciation.

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Winter looked at the sheet of paper again. He frowned. Then he turned the page right side up. The audience whimpered, begging to be allowed to laugh. Now Windy Winter's face changed. His eyes became round as ping-pong balls. His jaw dropped two inches. The words came from deep inside, working their way several times around the rim of his contorted lips before he whined them out, up and down the scale: "Yeeeoooo dirrrtttyyyy . . ."

Released, the audience screamed in ecstasy, adding applause to their laughter while Windy Winter ripped the paper to confetti and hurled it in clouds after the actor as he chased him into the wings. Blackout. Commercial.

It had worked. The new character was a natural. The running gag had been established and Ed was "in" as a contributor to one of the big shows.

Until he spoke to Windy Winter on the phone later that night. Much revelry filled the line but Winter's voice came through loud and clear.

"Your gag? You didn't have any gag I can remember. That's why we decided to bring in this actor."

"But wasn't that my suggestion —that you make a running gag out of this character?"

"Look, kid, the running gag is older than you'll ever be. So don't come to me for any credit."

Ed thought of a dozen things he wanted to say, but he said nothing. The telephone mouthpiece smelled sour under his nose. Into his ear poured the echo of Windy Winter's party. He thought he heard big Sheila's voice baying through the pack.

Then into Ed's confusion, Winter said, "Tell you what. If you ever do think of a new gag, come and see me. If I like it, I'll buy it. If I buy it, I'll use it." Then, just before he hung up, "I may even pay you for it."

For the next three weeks Winter keyed a section of each program to the arrival of the little guy in the straw hat and horn-rimmed glasses. Every time the stooge walked on he got a laugh. The folded sheet of paper became one of the big "show biz" gags of the season.

And Windy worked miracles with it. He'd set the page on fire and say with a leer, "He's got to be kiddin'!" Another time he'd fold the page, tuck it into his wallet, and break up the audience by rolling his eyes as he slipped the wallet back into his breast pocket. For some indefinable reason every variation of the running gag was sure-fire.

Week by week national awareness of this bit of business grew. It was big, very big. And with his professional sense of timing, Windy Winter chose the fourth week to announce that on the next show he would definitely reveal the 100% original gag, once and for all.

Ed Parsons read the announce-

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ment in a column on the entertainment page. His idea may have been born at that moment. It could have been seeded almost a month ago when the comedian had said, "I may even pay," before he laughed and hung up the telephone. This was not important. It was the "idea" that was important.

The gag involved Ed's getting backstage the night of the fifth program. He took the afternoon off, went directly to the theater, walked in, and lost himself among the props and scenery. Supper time came and went, and Ed, crouched on a trunk behind a dusty flat, became muscle-cramped and hungry. Then he heard Winter and Sheila heading out for a drink before showtime, so he was able to come out and stretch.

Airtime drew closer and Ed began to wonder if the walk-on actor had come in some other way. He was about to start searching when his man appeared. Carrying a suitcase, he picked his way past cables, ropes, and costume racks.

Ed followed and saw him step into a cluttered room and close the door. Ed knocked, paused, then barged in. He closed the door quietly, glanced around, and saw they were alone. Breathing a sigh of relief, he clenched his right fist behind his back and took a step toward the little actor. Then he looked into the open face exactly level with his own, saw the wrinkles around the eyes, saw that the eyes were dark brown and friendly. And he could not do it. He could not knock out this man. Not physically.

But there is always another way. It required a preposterous hard luck story which Ed improvised; it involved a suspected family relationship with the actor and the sudden absence of a dear sister who had to be located. There was much playing by ear in the conversation which began in the small dressing room and ended in the bar next door, but Ed made it work.

The actor, a sweet man with the improbable name of Donny Brooke, went to sleep in a back booth while Ed Parsons was still sober enough to hurry back to the theater. He slipped inside and put on the loud, oversize sports jacket, straw hat, and horn-rimmed glasses just in time to hear the pre-show audience-warmup begin. He glanced in the dressing-room mirror. The resemblance was close. To help it, he squeezed some silver greasepaint from a tube and smeared it on his hair at the temples.

Only one more thing remained to be done—to transfer his single prop, purchased that afternoon at a department store, from his own suit pocket to the pocket of the sports jacket. Now the sheet of paper. Quickly he scribbled the lines in heavy pencil, folded the sheet once, and left the dressing room.

From that point on things took care of themselves. He could hear Winter's voice over the P.A. as the

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show began. Cameras dollied here and there. Hordes of dancers ran on and off stage.

Then he heard Winter begin the introduction to "The Original Gag." Hands seized Ed and moved him to the edge of the pool of light. Through sweat-blind eyes he could see the comedian planted like a barrel at stage center. A sudden thought struck him: What was the joke that Winter intended to use?

"Here he comes now!" Windy called out, and applause greeted Ed Parsons as he scuttled into the light to confront his enemy in the arena of a million TV screens. The studio audience became silent as Ed reached the center of the stage. Winter glanced at him, held out his hand for the paper, then glanced again at the eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses.

Yes. He had recognized Ed. But there had been little hope of prolonging the disguise. From here on, all he needed was nerve.

"Okay, let's have it," Winter said. "No more jazz. This is the real thing tonight. Right?"

Ed handed over the note and Winter began the elaborate unfolding process that was now a public ritual. The audience waited, still silent. They believed in their Windy. He had told them it would happen tonight, so it would happen tonight.

And it did. The comedian stared at the bold handwriting. Uncoaxed, his eyes bugged out. Without guile, his mouth dropped open. The words snarled at him from the sheet of paper.

This gun is loaded. Give me your wallet or I will kill you.

Winter let the page drop from his fingers. He glanced down and saw the gun Ed was holding. It looked very real. He stared into the glazed eyes behind the horn-rims and saw panic staging a rough struggle with determination.

Turning his head to the camera and raising his arms slowly above his head, Windy Winters said in a fractured voice, "It's a stick-up."

And the place disintegrated. The sound technician almost fell off the microphone boom. The audience roared. In the control room the producer skidded off his swivel stool and hit the floor with 35 pages of carefully timed script cascading over his bald head. In 18,000,000 homes across the country, according to the latest survey, a huge cross section of the population began punching each other and yelling, "He's sticking up old Windy. The little guy is robbing Windy Winter!"

Which was exactly true.

Ed Parsons now had Windy Winter's wallet, and Windy, giggling hysterically for some reason Ed could not understand, had turned over his gold tie clip, his gold cuff links, his gold lighter, and now the big ruby ring from his little finger. Ed clutched the loot to his chest, the toy gun pointing to his own chin in a droll *faux pas* that convulsed the studio audience still fur-

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ther. Then, as his victim knelt and cowered in the spotlight, the thief fled into the wings.

A couple of stagehands slapped Ed on the back as he scurried by, but most of the cast were either wiping their eyes or getting ready for the next number. Because the show must go on.

It went on. Less than one minute later, his costume jettisoned in a corner, Ed flitted out of the stage door while Windy Winter's voice boomed across the P.A. "I don't hear my insurance company laughing."

They were rolling in the aisles.

In a dark corner at Luke's Bar, Ed checked the wallet and found $310. He took five twenties, tucked them into his own billfold, and put the rest of the money back. Then he had five drinks and went home.

Reeling up the stairs to his room, he knew he was wrong but he felt he was right. Winter had stolen some of his material; now Ed had extracted fair payment. The rest would go back in a registered envelope tomorrow. Let Windy Winter call the cops. Ed Parsons would plead his case before any judge in the country.

His key seemed to have split into three blurred ends and his keyhole was an elusive shadow. Ed crouched in the hallway and began to enjoy the game. Then his door swung open and he tumbled forward into the room—at the feet of Windy Winter who closed the door, snapped on the light, and sat down in the only chair.

"I busted the lock to get in," Winter said. "Don't scream."

"How did you find this place?"

"Your address was on the script you left a month ago. Sure, they cribbed your stuff."

"I handed that material to you. You're responsible. That's why I took a hundred dollars from you." Ed handed over the wallet and the jewelry. "Here's everything else. I'm no thief."

"Oh, yes, you are." Winter drowned the stub of his cigar in a glass of water that remained on Ed's bedside table from the night before. "You are now the anonymous hood who committed the world's first live, legitimate television stick-up. I told the cops afterward that I never saw you before."

"The real actor can recognize me. I spent an hour with him."

"Yeah. But he'll never see you again. Now, listen."

Ed listened. He would be a "silent" contributor. He would work out of a room adjoining Windy's own hotel suite. He would not approach the studio scene—not until every last drop of publicity had been milked out of the robbery situation. He would draw $500 a week. Sold!

It was all so unexpected that Windy Winter had left and Ed was in the sack with his eyes still staring before he remembered what he had

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forgotten to ask. He had to find out. So he fell out of bed and crawled to the telephone.

"Sorry to bug you so late, Mr. Winter."

"What do you want, kid?"

"I couldn't get to sleep before I found out something."

"Okay, what?"

"Well, supposing I *hadn't* been there tonight. I mean, what if the actor had come out and handed you the sheet of paper? You had the whole country hanging on to hear the one hundred per cent original gag. What was it going to be?"

"I had a little something up my sleeve. See, I went out today and got married. I was going to announce that publicly."

Ed Parsons stretched out flat on the threadbare carpet, letting the cool telephone lie across his fevered face. Eyes closed, he mumbled, "Gee, Mr. Winter, that's not very original."

"You're right, kid," Winter admitted. "It's just society's switch on Nature's oldest gag. And believe me, it isn't very funny. But when you're hard up for something to say . . ."

Ed heard Sheila's strident voice and the fist on flesh simultaneously. Her words were loud and clear—and vulgar. The phone clattered to the floor and the sounds of struggle ended in the slam of a door.

Then Windy was back on the line, breathing hard. "Okay, genius," he said, "there's your first writing assignment."

"What's that, boss?" Ed said.

"Do me some black-eye jokes. I now own the original one of those. And maybe before the end of the season you can write me a monologue about a murder."

NEXT MONTH . . .

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The March 1965 issue will be on sale February 4, 1965

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HELEN McCLOY**

TITLE: ***Into Thin Air***

TYPE: Detective Puzzle

DETECTIVE: Dr. Basil Willing

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *When a bank president vanishes into thin air, and $380,000 vanishes with him, it's time to call in Dr. Basil Willing . . . Are you willing to match wits with Willing?*

THE MOMENT DR. BASIL WILLING entered Police Headquarters he realized that something important was going on. The uniformed man at the switchboard, hands flying from plug to socket, nodded absently without his usual grin. "The Inspector's waiting for you in his office, Dr. Willing."

"Waiting" implies repose. Actually, Assistant Chief Inspector Patrick Foyle was pacing the floor as he dictated to a wire-recording machine, his slight, wiry body in such rapid motion that it seemed to flash about the office with the crackling energy of an electric charge. He greeted Basil with a wintry smile and shut off the recorder.

"Any savings in the Conservative Trust Company, Doc?"

Basil Willing settled himself on the window sill. The brown eyes in his lean, intellectual face were always skeptical and now faintly amused. "A psychiatric assistant to the District Attorney doesn't save money, Pat. Why?"

"Don't you listen to the radio?"

"Not if I can help it."

"It was on the air at eleven last night. Matthew Rex, President of the Conservative Trust, has vanished into thin air. So have $80,000 in cash and $300,000 in bearer bonds. I've got to find him—and you've got to prove he's sane. Here's his photo."

Basil saw a narrow face with a

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high forehead and dark hair, gray at the temples. The eyes were brilliant under bushy brows, but one eye was round, the other narrow, and this asymmetry gave the whole face a look of calculation and duplicity. "Sane—possibly," said Basil. "Neurotic—probably. Who saw him last?"

"His wife, Alida. She's in the outer office. I'll send for her so you can hear her story."

Alida Rex looked twenty years younger than her husband's picture. A mink coat hung from her shoulders over a loosely cut suit of fine beige tweed. She was hatless, with fair hair swept back from a face pale and hard as marble. A cigarette dangled from the sullen, scarlet mouth and her slender, ungloved fingers were stained with nicotine. Gregory Davis, the lawyer, came in with her—a living portrait of ruffled respectability.

"I called for Matt at the bank yesterday in my own car at three o'clock," Alida told Basil Willing. "We were going shopping. I was about fifteen minutes early, but to my surprise he was already in the lobby, carrying a brief case. He said, 'Just a moment, dear, I have to make a telephone call first.' He seemed calm and cheerful as he stepped into the public telephone booth, but . . . Dr. Willing, he never came out of that booth! After waiting about five minutes I walked over to the booth and—it was empty."

"Did you ever take your eyes off the phone-booth door?" asked Basil.

"Only once, when I stood at the cashier's wicket to cash a check. It couldn't have taken more than half a minute. I didn't have to stand in line."

"You were fifteen minutes early, yet he was already in the lobby," mused Basil. "That probably means he hoped to get away before you came. When he saw you he thought fast and gambled on the hundred to one chance you wouldn't see him leave the booth. Did you report his disappearance to the police then?"

"No. That would have meant publicity, which Matt hates. I thought he had been rude to me but—well, I thought he knew what he was doing, and that it would be better for me not to interfere. Then, last night, the police phoned Matt about the missing money . . . I had to tell them I didn't know where he was."

"Have you any idea where he has gone?"

"No, but . . . he has a ranch in Arizona and a fishing lodge in Bermuda."

"We've already radioed the Bermuda and Arizona police," put in Foyle. "We should get replies at any moment."

Gregory Davis intervened, pompous as only a corporation lawyer can be. "Obviously Matthew Rex is mentally unbalanced—a case of wandering amnesia. Isn't 'fugue' the technical term, Dr. Willing?"

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"Amnesia!" Foyle snorted. "You mean he forgot his own identity but he didn't forget $380,000 in cash and bearer bonds?"

A buzzer sounded on the desk. A voice came through the intercom. "Mrs. Rex to see you, Inspector."

"Mrs. Rex? She's already here!"

Alida spoke quietly. "That will be the first Mrs. Rex—Matt's divorced wife, Josephine."

"Okay," said the Inspector. "Send her in."

The first Mrs. Rex might have posed for the archetypal housewife of the advertisements if the eyes in her broad, plain face had not been red with tears. She looked uneasy and self-conscious in her handsome sealskin coat and her high-heeled lizard sandals. A lambskin coat and flat, calfskin oxfords would have suited her much better.

She addressed Foyle, ignoring the others. "Inspector, my former husband, Matthew Rex, has just sent me this radiogram."

Alida exclaimed, "He radioed *you*?"

Josephine looked at Alida. "Of course he radioed me when he was in trouble. I am his oldest friend. He knew a chit of a girl wouldn't stand by him when he was disgraced and his money gone."

Foyle was studying the radiogram. "It's dated midnight last night from Hamilton, Bermuda. It says: 'Just heard news broadcast slandering my name Stop Notify New York police I shall arrive La-Guardia Field by private plane noon tomorrow Stop Can explain everything—Matthew Rex.' "

"Maybe he is insane." Basil smiled quizzically at the lawyer. "Why come back when you've got safely out of the country with $380,000 in cash and bonds?"

"A man who takes a big hunk of capital from a bank often tries to make a deal with the District Attorney," suggested Foyle. "Rex may try to buy a light sentence by offering to return part of the money." He paused to look at Davis and the two women. "You three know Rex better than we do. Would he try a stunt like that?"

Alida shrugged. "I really don't know him so well. We've been married only seven months."

Davis spluttered. "Only a man who was—ah—unbalanced would—ah—conduct himself in such a manner."

Josephine sighed. "Matt was always impulsive. He loved money. And he liked to . . . cut corners. He kept his own plane and pilot at a Long Island airport always in readiness for emergencies. All he had to do was get into a car and drive out there any time of day or night."

Basil had a swift vision of a desperate man holding himself to the legal speed limit as he drove from the bank to the airport, knowing that at any moment Alida might give the alarm or the bankers might find their assets missing—knowing

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too that every second's delay brought him that much nearer to a prison sentence. But also knowing there would be far worse delay if he were arrested for a traffic violation before he reached the airport. Obviously, the man had nerve and brains. Would such a man throw in his hand so early in the game?

Basil looked at Josephine. "You can't prove this radiogram came from Rex himself. It may have been sent by some crank in Bermuda who heard the story of his absconding on the news broadcast last night."

Josephine blanched. "Then . . . where is Matt?"

A uniformed sergeant came in with a radiogram for the Inspector. "Looks as if your message was genuine, Mrs. Rex. Listen to this from the Bermuda police: 'Nobody at Matthew Rex fishing lodge now except Arthur Lampson caretaker who says he saw Rex arrive here yesterday in private plane with pilot Francis Dudley to spend night Stop Rex said returning to New York next day Stop Lampson asleep when plane took off this morning but wakened by engine and saw plane in air from window heading north about six A.M.'"

Basil looked at his watch. "What are we waiting for? It's due at LaGuardia in fifty-five minutes."

"We can make it in forty with a police car and a siren," returned Foyle. "I would like the ladies and Mr. Davis to come with us."

"Why?" demanded Davis.

"Because Rex's return is just too good to be true," answered Foyle. "There must be a catch in it somewhere. If you're along you may help us spot it."

Basil Willing never approached LaGuardia Field without feeling that he was stepping into the world of the future. That impression was peculiarly vivid when he went there directly from downtown Manhattan where the narrow, twisting streets, each with its glimpse of masts and harbor water, were so eloquent of the past and a walled Colonial seaport called New Amsterdam. The Eighteenth Century merchants who left their names to streets like Pell and Delancey had long since given way to Nineteenth Century industrialists who piled steel and concrete on the site of the city wall and the bowling green. They too were gone now and the center of gravity had shifted from water to air. Far outside the city there was a new Port of New York; all long runways and low hangars built for ships with wings that roared down from the sky every hour of the day and night, coming from Europe and Asia and Africa in hours instead of the weeks and days it had taken by sail and steam.

The police siren faded to silence when they reached the parkway. "What sort of private plane is it?" Basil asked Alida.

"A small passenger plane," she answered listlessly. "The pilot's

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cockpit is shut off from the cabin so passengers can have privacy. It's about the size of the main lounge on a small yacht. Adjoining it are a lavatory and kitchenette."

The great expanse of sky at LaGuardia was the hard, brilliant blue of a glazed tile that morning. Sunlight struck fire from the glass and chromium fixtures of each plane as it landed. Basil and the others waited near a runway while Sergeant Samson went to consult officials in the observation tower. He came back at a jog trot. "Just landing now, Chief! There she is!"

The first Mrs. Rex bit her underlip. Two tears squeezed their way between her eyelids. The second Mrs. Rex lit another cigarette from the stub of the previous one. "Yes." She spoke in a small, dry voice. "That is Matt's plane."

It was painted silver with the gleam of fish scales. Basil felt his pulse quicken in time to the beat of the engine as it swelled louder and nearer. It dwindled to a hum and died.

Samson started forward while the plane was still in the air. One of the mechanics yelled angrily, "Wanta get yourself killed, cop?"

With the grace of an alighting gull, the landing gear kissed the runway smoothly and the plane taxied toward them.

"Good pilot," muttered Foyle.

"Yes." The small, dry voice was Alida's. "Frank Dudley is good. Thirty-two missions over Germany and now—this."

The plane swung around in profile to the little group. Its single exit door fitted so smoothly they spotted it only by a handle on their left and hinges on their right.

Samson was at the door the moment the wheels of the undercarriage ceased spinning. He reached for the handle and wrenched it open. A few feet behind him the others heard his voice: "Mr. Rex!" The bulky sergeant was scrambling into the plane.

Basil was the first to follow. He stopped on the threshold in amazement.

Except for Samson the cabin was empty.

Foyle, close behind Basil, whistled softly. "Try the lavatory."

Samson had already turned to an inside door at right angles to the exit. He knocked. No answer. He tried the handle and the door opened. Sun from a small window shone on white tiles. Beyond, through another doorway, Basil saw a kitchenette as shallow as the galley of a cabin cruiser.

Both cubbyholes were empty.

Slowly Basil turned back into the cabin. His glance swept it from end to end. Chinese rug, blue and cream color. White leather chairs. Bleached mahogany tables. Every window latched on the inside.

On one chair lay a gray fedora with a black band. On another chair, a pair of gray suede gloves with

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black stitching. On a low table, a shot glass etched with palm leaves and the monogram: *M R.* It was half filled with brandy. In the copper ashtray were six cigarette stubs with cork tips. They too bore the monogram: *M R.*

Josephine and Alida were entering the cabin. Josephine caught her breath. "Those things are Matt's. But . . . where is he?"

"What the . . . ?" Samson displaced his hat as he rubbed his head in perplexity. "Chief, you saw me open the door just as the plane landed. This door is the only exit to the compartment. He couldn't have got out without bumping into me —I was right there."

Just then the door of the cockpit opened and a young man stepped down into the cabin lightly on the balls of his feet. He was tall and rangy, with tousled sandy hair. The blue eyes in his sunbrowned face had a shrewd twinkle. He paused as he saw the little crowd. "Quite a reception committee!"

"Hello, Frank." Alida smiled for the first time that morning. "Matt's in trouble. These are police."

Foyle intervened. "Are you the pilot, Francis Dudley?"

"Yes." Dudley's glance measured the Inspector.

"You'd better talk fast, young fellow, or you'll find yourself in trouble. Where is Matthew Rex?"

Dudley's lower jaw fell slack. "Where? Isn't he here?"

"Is he?" Foyle spoke tartly. "No one got out when the plane landed. We climbed in and found things like this. Take a look."

Dudley stood still, gazing at the people in the cabin, then at the empty lavatory and kitchenette. His lips shut tight. "I get it."

"That's more than I do," retorted Foyle. "Spill it."

"Mr. Rex was nervous. I didn't know it was a police matter but I knew something was up. He had a brief case chained to his wrist. He didn't eat much dinner at the lodge. My room there was next to his last night. I was wakened twice by the sound of his footfalls tramping up and down . . . This morning at breakfast he wouldn't take anything but black coffee and brandy. When he got into this cabin he went straight to the kitchenette and poured himself a drink. He was sitting in that chair drinking and smoking when I shut the door of the cockpit and took off."

"Sure he didn't fool you? Get out before you took off?" snapped Foyle.

"He came into the cockpit two hours ago to ask me what time we'd reach LaGuardia. I could see he'd been drinking all morning. His hands were shaking."

"Then where is he?"

"Look, sir." Dudley crossed the cabin to close the lavatory door and the exit door. "You see it now?"

Foyle shook his head. But Basil's eyes narrowed as if a sudden, mons-

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trous possibility had occurred to him.

"These two two doors." Dudley's voice was vibrant with emotion. "Both bleached mahogany panels on this side. And identical chromium handles. Fancy stuff, put in when Rex bought the plane."

"So what?" prompted Foyle.

"So this: a nervous man who has been drinking steadily gets up to go to the lavatory. He comes to two absolutely identical doors that are at right angles to each other and—he opens the wrong door . . . the exit door instead of the lavatory door. He's like those people who open an elevator door when the elevator isn't there and fall down the shaft. He's so sure that it's going to be the lavatory that he can't stop his forward motion in the time it takes his eyes to see the empty air and the sea far, far below.

"His own momentum carries him forward. He walks on air—literally—and plunges twenty thousand feet to the ocean below with his brief case still chained to his wrist. He claws at the void and screams, but I don't hear him. The wind snatches the breath out of his scream, the roar of the motor stops my ears against any echo.

"Poor devil . . . even if he was a crook, it's a hell of a way to die! Think of that moment—when he expected a solid floor under him and then his foot dropped through unresisting air and he knew he couldn't stop himself, knew he must fall from a height that would make the water hard as stone when he hit it, breaking his neck before it drowned him . . . God! To think I've been flying an empty plane half the way to New York and never even suspected it!"

Josephine moaned. "Let me get out of here . . ."

But Basil put out a restraining hand. "Not so fast. Mr. Dudley has a vivid imagination. I can almost see Matthew Rex falling—only it didn't happen that way. And now I know what did happen."

"What do you mean?" gasped Foyle.

"You have all the facts now, Inspector. Given those facts there's only one thing that could have happened. It's time you made an arrest."

CHALLENGE TO THE READER: *As Dr. Willing said, you now have all the facts . . . Whom would you arrest? And why? Dr. Willing explains on page 124.*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **NEIL M. CLARK**

TITLE: ***Hit and Run***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Vic knew all the angles. He knew what had happened when his pal Jim hit an old woman one night with his car. It wasn't Jim's fault—but look what they did to him! Well, Vic knew better . . .*

WE STOPPED IN THIS SPOT after the ball game, Vic and I, for a couple of small ones. It was a sticky, hot afternoon, with plenty of traffic heading out to Lake Drive that time of day; but Vic is the kind of driver that it makes no difference if he has a drink or two. "Alcohol slows your reaction time," he says. What he says is, you got to compensate, be extra-careful.

"See that blue car just ahead—" it was in our lane. "What's that driver going to do? Got to think for him and you too." Where Lake Drive crosses Broadway there's a traffic light. "Way he's driving," Vic says, "he'll try to beat the red light. Want to bet on it?"

If I'd bet, I'd won. That driver maybe had a black mark against him or something wasn't normal. Anyhow, his stop light went on suddenly, and his car slid to a smooth stop while the green was still turning to yellow. Vic slammed on his brake and screeched to a hard stop only a wish and a prayer behind the other bumper.

"Good for Vic!" Vic grinned. "See what I mean, Bill? Sure I've had a couple. But did I hit him? Huh *uh*! I compensated. All these accidents you read about, they don't have to happen. It's the drivers, always the drivers."

Fast thinking is what makes Vic the great sales manager he is. Things he did that day I never would have got away with. I don't think very fast—at least, not fast enough.

Traffic thins out after Broadway

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and keeps getting lighter toward the suburbs. It was dark when we reached Maple Park and by then there weren't hardly any cars on the road. I've nearly always lived in Maple Park, and Vic and Livy moved there twelve years ago when their boy Louie was born. There's no place better to bring up a kid, Vic says, it's almost like real country. The street lights are kind of far apart and that's probably why neither of us saw this kid on the bicycle till he rode off the sidewalk right into our headlights.

Vic couldn't miss hitting him. Nobody could. There was a breaking-glass sound, and the bicycle went one way, the kid with it, and Vic stopped before we went thirty feet. It all happened in a jiffy.

I saw the bicycle bent and broken and the kid's face down on the grass, not moving or saying a thing. There wasn't any blood. I bent down to turn him over.

"Don't!" Vic said. "Don't touch him, Bill!" Vic looked kind of white, probably because of the poor light.

"Why not?" I asked stupidly.

"Just don't touch him!"

"Maybe he's hurt. Let's get him to a doctor."

"Listen, Bill—" he grabbed and shoved me in the car—"I gotta tell you something. Something important."

I could have got out, and later that's what I thought I ought to have done. But Vic is my boss at the office; I'm used to doing what he says, and as I said, he thinks fast. He went around back and picked up glass from the headlight that's broken on his car, and got back in and laid it on the seat between us.

"They can trace a car by things like that," he said, "but I got most of the pieces." He started the car, shifted, and before I knew what he was up to, the car raced ahead. Last I saw, the kid was still lying there.

Vic had his scheme figured out that quick. Nobody had seen us. The place was mostly vacant lots and trees. The few houses were dark and it was dinner time and no cars were passing, and it wasn't five minutes till we were three miles away. Then Vic slowed down and began to talk.

"Listening, Bill?" His voice sounded thick—like maybe he was scared the way I was.

"I'm listening."

"Know why we had to do that?" It was "we" right from the start. "This guy Jim," he said, "he's the guy used to have your job. Great pal of mine, a real cool customer. He hit an old woman one night with his car. It was her fault. She was in a hurry, didn't look where she was going, popped in front of the car just like that fool kid did. Jim couldn't help hitting her. And here's what happened to Jim—now get this, Bill.

"He started to help her, just like you started to, and a police car came along. They found the old woman was hurt bad, dying, and the officer

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smelled Jim's breath. Jim'd had a couple of small ones, Bill, all he ever took, just like us. He was a swell driver. They took him to the station and gave him these tests and claimed there was enough liquor in him so he was under the influence.

"Well, you know what, Bill? That was the end of things for Jim—end of job, money, everything. He got five years for manslaughter, only it was suspended, but the old woman's family sued and got a judgment, thousands and thousands of dollars, and there wasn't enough liability insurance, and it took everything Jim had, and more too, and he's been nothing but a bum ever since.

"That's what they do to innocent guys like us, Bill. I couldn't help hitting that kid, could I?"

"Sure not. But—"

"It was all his fault, wasn't it? You admit that, don't you?"

"Sure, but—"

"But *what*?"

"We could have helped him—"

"And get what Jim got? Bill, the kid wasn't hurt bad. I could see that. Had the wind knocked out of him, that's all. But suppose he had been hurt: it'd be our word, and they'd throw the book at us. They'd say we were driving under the influence, and you know what that means. Those are the angles you got to think of, Bill. We weren't to blame, but who'd believe us? It *had* to be this way!"

Vic can talk a monkey into thinking he's human. He almost had me agreeing—at least, I couldn't think of any answers. But I didn't feel too good.

"I'm glad you see it that way too, Bill," Vic went on. "Nothing happens to us, and the kid'll be all right. I'll figure some way so he gets a new bike—and by golly, Bill, I nearly forgot the big news I was going to tell you on the way home. Do you know what Jake Berger and me decided this morning? You been doing great work and we're raising you, the company is, a hundred bucks a month starting next month. How's that, old man? Pretty good, huh?"

Yeah, I thought, good—great—swell—and it smells like skunk. I didn't like my boss a whole lot just then.

Vic drove back toward the city instead of home. He stayed on side streets mostly, and kept his speed down and an eye out for police cars. Twice he drew up to the curb and turned off his lights, and I knew why. He was driving a one-eyed car—the right headlight busted—and that's poison in our town at night. They catch you, they book you.

Once Vic had a pretty close call. A police car turned the corner a block off and came our way. Vic hauled over quick, stopped, and turned off his lights. But the patrol car stopped too.

"Mister," the officer called over without getting out, "do you know

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you're driving with only one headlight?"

Vic was quick as a wink. "Is that damn thing out again? I had it fixed just this morning." He got out and went around front pretending to look. "Yep," he said, "it's out again."

The policeman seemed in a good humor. "Maybe they put in the wrong size sealed-beam," he said. "It'll burn right out if they do. I got a tip for you, Mac. Get it fixed first thing in the morning, or somebody'll be giving you a ticket."

"Thanks, officer," and Vic added that he was through driving for that night. "Whew!" he let out as the police car drove off. We sat there several minutes. When he started again, Vic headed toward Broadway.

"Know something, Bill," he said as if he had just that minute thought of it. "I wonder if Flint Bander would be open? He could fix that headlight for us if he is." I mumbled something. I saw that Vic was figuring angles again.

We hit Broadway two blocks from Flint's shop. Flint is the most honest garageman in the whole city —so honest he has to work half the night to pay his bills. He has his living quarters on the same lot as his shop, and almost any night you go by, you'll see him working till nine or ten o'clock, or even later.

"Wouldn't it be a smart idea, Bill," Vic said, "if we had a story fixed up for Flint?"

I didn't know what he meant. He was driving real slow, keeping an eye on the rear-view mirror and the sidewalk. All of a sudden he swerved and ran over the curb almost into a light pole.

"Did you see what that s.o.b. did!" Vic shouted. He was out of the car like that, and around front with the broken headlight pieces in his hand. He dropped the pieces in front of the light pole. "Bill!" he yelled, "look what he did to us— one of our headlight's busted."

He wasn't saying it for me. A few people had stopped to see what happened, and more kept stopping. Vic was talking for them. "If I hadn't seen him coming," he said, "he'd have hit us, sure as the devil."

"Did you get his number?" somebody asked.

"They hadn't ought to let drivers like that on the road," somebody else said.

"Lucky it's your headlight and not your fender," some smart character said. "Fender'd cost you plenty."

So Vic had his "accident" all set for Flint. The people drifted off, and he left me in the car while he walked to Flint's shop, a couple of doors away. I kept thinking about the kid we hit and what I better do —whether I should go look for a policeman or something; but while I was studying on it Vic came back with Flint to look at the "damage."

Flint saw me and said, "Hi, Bill, having a little trouble?" And right

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then I could have spilled it all to a good guy what kind of trouble we really had; but I didn't. What I said was, "Does it look like it, Flint?"

That was a dumb crack and Vic gave me a hard look. But Flint saw nothing wrong in it.

"Can you fix it for us?" Vic asked.

"Think so," Flint said. He's never positive. "Drive her in the shop and we'll see."

It didn't take Flint long to put in a new sealed-beam. He spotted a couple of fender scratches and dabbed paint on so that it would have taken an expert to notice anything.

"What kind of a car crowded you?" Flint asked.

"I couldn't be sure, Flint. It was about the size of a four-door, I'd say. Wouldn't you, Bill?"

The question caught me off guard. If I'd been a fast thinker I'd have said, "Hell, Flint, there wasn't any other car and Vic knows it." But I'm not a fast thinker. "I don't know what kind of a car it was," I said, practically proving Vic's story that there *was* a car.

I hoped after this we'd pull out for home, but Vic was still figuring the angles. He drove up Broadway as far as Scott Street, turned west, and in a couple of blocks turned in at Joe's Diner.

"What you stopping here for?" I asked.

"Why not? Ain't you hungry?"

I didn't have any quick reasons. "Isn't Livy expecting you?"

"I told her we might be late."

"I'm not hungry."

"Sure you're hungry. It's after eight. We haven't had a thing since lunch."

So I went in with him and soon saw what his idea was. Joe knows me and Vic and everybody else, almost, and Vic wanted him to hear how we'd been to the ball game and had been working afterward out in the Arlington section which is a long way and in a different direction from Maple Park; and Vic made a point of the time and how late we were eating, and how we were anxious to get home, and so on.

It was a real buildup—just in case there was ever any need for it, you understand. So it was past 8:30 when we left Joe's and I thought sure we'd head for home then, but Vic drove out Birchwood and looked out the window in front of the apartment house where Jake Berger lives.

"By golly," Vic said, "Jake's home—his light's on. Let's go up a minute."

"Why?" I said. I'm stupid, real stupid.

"Only take a minute. Want to ask Jake something. Come on."

So we went up, and Vic did some more buildup on where we'd been and what we'd done—all a lot of baloney. Jake is treasurer of our company and he would have been a good man for me to spill to, only I never did know him too well, and he and Vic are good pals; so I just

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kept my big mouth shut and hardly listened while they talked about that Higgins & Ware job we're doing. Just buildup.

Vic even did some more trail laying after we left Jake. We stopped at a drug store and he went in for cigars and gassed about where we'd been all day. Here at last I had my chance. While Vic was busy I noticed Mike O'Halloran in uniform at the prescription counter. Mike is the finest policeman I ever knew. When I was a kid, Mike was the cop on our street. Lots of things he knew about us kids, he never told, even to our parents, and the result was, he had a million friends. Once I knocked a baseball through Granny Moore's front window and Mike saw me do it. He put a big paw on my shoulder. I was scared.

"Got a buck on you, Bill?" he asked.

"N-n-no, sir!"

"Here's one," he said. "Take this and run over and give it to Mrs. Moore and tell her you're sorry. This will pay for having it fixed. That's the square thing to do. Sometime when you have a buck you can pay it back."

That's the kind of cop O'Halloran is. I saw I could go right back there and tell him about hitting the kid, and he'd know what to do. I was halfway there when Vic clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Coming, Bill? Time we were getting home. Let's go."

Like a big ape I turned and went out with him—and missed my chance.

There were one or two more stops, so it was about eleven when we pulled up in front of Vic's house. I got out and slammed the door and was all set to walk to my house, which is only two blocks away, but Vic said, "Come in a minute, Bill, then I'll drive you home. Livy's gone to bed, I guess, but she'll be awake and—" lowering his voice "—it'll be a good idea to let her know we've been out together—working."

Both of us were still in it.

The house looked dark and quiet as we went in, with just a few dim lights on. Vic spoke to me as if he were trying to keep his voice down, but it carried just the same. "Only keep you a minute, Bill," he said. "Want to give you the rest of the papers and figures on that Hudson job—"

Livy came to the head of the stairs and looked down. She saw Vic but I doubt if she even knew I was there. "Vic," she said, and sounded funny, "where've you been? I've been trying everywhere to find you."

"Why, Livy, Bill and I been working."

"All this time?"

"Of course. Why?" I think Vic noticed something. "Nothing's wrong, I hope, sweet?"

"Oh, Vic!" Her hand went to her throat.

"What is it, Livy?"

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"It's—Louie."

"What about Louie?"

"Somebody—oh, Vic, I can't say it. Some crazy, crazy driver hit him on his bicycle and ran away and left him—"

I could feel Vic wilt, and you could hardly hear his voice. "Who—do they know who did it?"

She shook her head.

"How—is he?"

"He—asked for you, Vic."

"He's—he's okay?"

"He said, 'Where's Dad?' Then he kind of smiled, and turned, and—oh, Vic, he's *gone*."

That's when I beat it. I knew I wouldn't have to find somebody to tell, ever. Vic had covered all the angles.

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Dr. Basil Willing continued, "Just as the plane taxied to a standstill, we saw Sergeant Samson open the closed exit door of the plane—the only exit. We saw the door hinges on our right and we saw the nose of the plane on our left.

"If that door had been opened during the flight, it could not have been closed again while the plane was in flight—because it would not close against the tremendous wind pressure of a plane traveling at high speed. Once that door was open, the wind pressure would have *kept it open until the plane landed.*

"According to Lampson, the caretaker, Rex was alive at the lodge last night. But Lampson did not see Rex leave the lodge this morning—he only saw the plane taking off. We must radio the Bermuda police to search the lodge for Rex's dead body and the missing money. And arrest Francis Dudley for murder."

Dudley's eyes blazed. "All right. I killed him. Last night I sent the radiogram signed with his name to his first wife, saying he would return by air—so I could fake an accident. Not for money alone. For Alida. I love her. She hated him. And he would not give her a divorce . . ."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLES B. CHILD**

TITLE: ***Do Not Choose Death***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Chafik

LOCALE: Baghdad, Iraq

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *We welcome the return to EQMM of Inspector Chafik—in a baffling murder case in which lipstick, so "notoriously dangerous," is surely the "signature of death."*

A TALL, GAUNT SERGEANT OF THE Baghdad Criminal Investigation Department entered the garden cinema of the Al-Rashid during the second showing of the main feature, which was a detective film. He searched for, and found, a neat little man, touched him on the shoulder, and said in Arabic, "Sir, permit me to disturb you."

"I hear you, Abdullah. But you interrupt my concentration on the truly baffling problem of this animated corpse."

"Sir, I regret, but there has been—"

Inspector Chafik rose reluctantly. "I shall never know the true story," he sighed, with a final glance at the film. "Well, Abdullah?"

"Sir, we have a corpse. The wife of Dr. Ibrahim Fadan of the Royal Hospital."

The Inspector followed his assistant to the waiting car. "Give me your report," he said, as they raced through the creamy moonlight.

"I have only the telephone report of the *Mufawwadh* of the police post at the north gate, sir. He states he was called to the house of Dr. Fadan by the resident servant, who returned from an evening's outing to find his mistress dead. Death was by strangulation."

"And the husband?"

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"They are searching for him. I understand the woman was of French birth."

Inspector Chafik extracted a card from the filing cabinet of his brain. "Naomi, nee Bousset," he quoted. "Born Paris, 1922. She met and married Ibrahim Fadan, in Beirut, in 1946. Fadan is a great surgeon, a man blessed with healing hands." Chafik shrugged and added softly, "I know other things, but they are indiscreet."

The car wheeled into the driveway of a house set back behind fine shade trees. It was convenient to the hospital where Dr. Fadan was resident surgeon. A trooper of the suburban patrol mounted guard at the door, and when the Inspector entered he was greeted by the local station officer.

The *Mufawwadh* said, "Since I telephoned, the husband has been traced. He is at the hospital, engaged in a delicate operation."

He went to the bedroom of Naomi Fadan and stopped in the doorway with hands folded behind his back, his thin face expressionless. The room was large. Windows opened on the Tigris. The river breeze stirred the curtains and also gave movement to the dark hair of the woman, whose body was flung carelessly across the bed.

She had been pretty. Chafik could understand why the doctor, a middle-aged bachelor, had been attracted to one so young and colorful; but he wondered why she had bound herself to a man much older, and of different race.

When he went nearer he saw faint reddish smudges on the ivory nightdress. Another one on the left cheek stood out with startling clarity, showing the whorls and looped ridges of an obvious thumbprint. There were lesser marks on the throat.

The woman's mouth and chin were smeared with lipstick, and Chafik said, "The killer stopped the victim's cries with a hand. Hence the fingerprints so generously distributed."

Sergeant Abdullah ventured, "Sir, if he had strangled her with unsmeared hands we would have found nothing. Fingers do not leave decipherable marks on flesh. This lipstick will hang him."

"Lipstick is notoriously dangerous," commented the Inspector dryly. He looked again at the mark on the parchment cheek. "But one does not attach such a seal to a document of crime."

Chafik stroked his cheek reflectively and went on, "I have no affection for fingerprints. Their design resembles a maze such as the one I wander in now."

He nodded to Corporal Yacoub of the Fingerprint Bureau, who was waiting with his apparatus, and turned from the corpse.

The Inspector wandered around the room, touching things absentmindedly, leaving his assistants to their duties. It was his custom to

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keep his mind inactive until supplied with facts.

He was idly examining a portrait hung above the bed when Abdullah called him. The sergeant had been searching a bureau crammed with old letters and hoarded bills and had arranged them in neat piles.

"There are letters which may be of interest, sir," he said. "They are, I venture to suggest, in the French language, but posted in Baghdad."

Chafik took the letters and glanced at the signatures. "Maurice," he announced. "And here on an envelope the full name—Maurice Lebrun."

"It is a French name, sir?"

"Lebrun, Maurice," Chafik said. "Age, twenty-seven. Place of birth, Paris. Came to Baghdad as cipher clerk to the French Legation in December, 1947. Lives at the Semiramis Hotel. A constant visitor to this house."

Abdullah pressed the palms of his hands together. "Madame was also young. I am informed the French are a passionate people."

"Your thoughts are impure," interrupted Chafik. He selected a letter and began to read with fluent ease. When he had finished he murmured, "But you are partly right. This Frenchman is passionate. It appears Madame confessed affection for Lebrun, but virtuously rejected him as lover. He begs her to come to him. He says she owes nothing to her husband, who is more interested in horses than in his young and beautiful wife—"

The Inspector stopped and turned to the picture on the wall, an oil painting by a well-known Baghdad artist, and an excellent likeness of Dr. Fadan on horseback. He was a man of frail appearance, his features finely drawn, his mouth rather too wide. But he sat the obviously spirited horse with authority, his hands iron on the reins.

"A strange picture to put above the bed of one's wife!" said Chafik. "But Fadan is a cripple—"

He continued reading Lebrun's letters. Although the correspondence was one-sided, the story unfolded was clear. The young people, Parisians brought together in a strange city, had found too much in common; but Naomi Fadan, with the marital loyalty of the bourgeois Frenchwoman, had rejected the appeals of her countryman.

The young man put himself at her feet with the subtle obeisance of the Latin. He undermined her with tenderness, deployed the artillery of passion, launched massed frontal attacks.

The final letter, which was a week old, held Chafik's attention. He read it twice, the second time with judicial caution. Lebrun announced his impending departure for Paris, stating he had been recalled. He wrote, "Come to the city you love with the man you love. Do not choose death . . ."

Chafik placed the letters in his

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portfolio. His thoughts shaped an intricate pattern, and he said, "He may mean the death of joy, the death of happiness. But what a singularly unfortunate word!" Hearing himself speak, he went to the window to hide embarrassment.

Below was the moonlit drive, partly hidden by the fanlike branches of a giant pride of India tree. A man came suddenly into view. He walked with a dragging motion of one leg.

Inspector Chafik drew back his head and said to Sergeant Abdullah, "Dr. Fadan has returned. There is no easy way to break the news to him. I must be brutal. When he sees me the news will announce itself. I carry the odor of death."

Dr. Ibrahim Faban stood in the study, leaning on the desk to take weight off his withered leg. He was gray with fatigue.

He said, "I do not understand. My wife was alone when I left. She had been unwell for some days and I made her go to bed before I went to the hospital." He raised his dark, tortured eyes to Inspector Chafik and asked, "Who did this thing?"

"My investigation has hardly begun."

"But you have some clue?"

"There are clues. But a pile of loose threads is not a Kirman rug. The weaver must make the design. There are questions to ask."

The doctor lowered himself to a chair. He picked up a silver statuette of a horse from the desk and fondled it. "The shock of your news is anesthetizing," he said. "I am ready for you, Inspector."

"First, at what time did you go to the hospital?"

"At nine o'clock—"

"The servant had left?"

"It was his free evening. He left at seven—"

"The operation you have just performed was an emergency?"

"No, Inspector. It was arranged several days ago. I operate at night because it is cooler."

Chafik lowered his head. "Forgive my clumsy indiscretion," he went on. "Did Madame expect a visitor?"

Dr. Fadan straightened in the chair. "What visitor?" he asked harshly.

"I speak of a young man who often comes to this house."

"So you know. The soil of Baghdad is indeed fertile for police eyes and ears." He made a gesture. "Forgive me. But I cannot answer your question justly. This Frenchman ruined my marriage."

Chafik thought of the letters in his portfolio. "You are sure?"

"What else?" demanded Fadan bitterly. "You can see I am a cripple." He struck the shortened leg with his fist. "Lebrun was young, handsome."

"Madame married you," Chafik said.

"Pity sometimes wears a cloak of love." Dr. Fadan rose, limped to

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the fireplace, and began rearranging the trophy cups and photographs of horses which littered the mantelshelf.

"I let the Frenchman come to the house because my wife was lonely for Paris. I thought she would be cheered. When I realized what had happened . . ."

"I understand." The Inspector made an awkward movement. "But you forbade Lebrun the house?"

"Since last week. That is why my wife was unwell."

"Has he visited her secretly?"

Fadan shrugged. "My spare time had been devoted to my stables at Hinadi. I discharged the groom on Sunday, and installed another the following day. It was very late when I returned home. My ill luck with grooms continued," he added. "The new man died."

"Died?"

"A heart ailment. He was an old Bedouin from one of the Beni Sakr tribes; an excellent man with horses. I found him dead when I went to the stables Tuesday evening. He was buried yesterday. I was obliged to take back the old groom as a temporary measure—but this is unimportant to you, Inspector. I mention it to show why I have been absent from the house most of the week, and therefore cannot know if Lebrun made clandestine visits."

"I will question the servant."

"He was my wife's, not mine."

"What kind of man is this Lebrun?"

"Excitable. I would not care to thwart him. Inspector, is it possible—"

The telephone began to ring. Fadan took it, then passed the instrument to Chafik. "It is a man named Yacoub."

The Inspector said to Corporal Yacoub of the Fingerprint Bureau, who was speaking from headquarters, "What have you?"

The expert answered, "I have classified the prints found on the lady and compared them with our records. The result will astonish you—"

"I am disciplined against astonishment. It is a weakness."

"Sir, I was led to the records of foreigners resident in Baghdad. The fingerprints were made by a cipher clerk of the French legation. One named Maurice Lebrun—"

Inspector Chafik made no reply. The stub of his cigarette burned lower. He was roused by the scorching of his own flesh, and as he put the blistered finger to his mouth, he reflected that his discipline had been faulty . . .

The report which reached the desk of H. J. Ellsworth, the next day, was a summary of hard facts, written with the detachment of a judge. Ellsworth, a former Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard, now adviser to the Iraqi government on police matters, and director of the C.I.D., read it with approval, and then

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glanced at Chafik, who was perched on the edge of a chair.

"A messy case," Ellsworth said. "Have you traced Lebrun?"

"No, sir. His room at the Semiramis had not been occupied since Monday. There should be nothing unusual about this because he is often away from Baghdad on official business. But he had a week's leave before the impending transfer to Paris."

"When was he last seen?"

"An arabana driver remembers taking him to the neighborhood of Dr. Fadan's house Monday evening. He had often driven him there." Chafik twisted his *sidarah*, the black forage cap worn by civilian Iraqis, then frowned at his hands. "The hotel switchboard operator remembers that a lady telephoned him earlier. She had a foreign accent and was distressed."

"It was probably Naomi Fadan's answer to his letter." Ellsworth picked up Lebrun's letters and looked at the attached translations. ". . . Do not choose death," he quoted. "That's the devil of a thing to write."

"There can be several interpretations, sir—"

"I can see only one." The Chief Inspector's voice was hard. "The woman's constant refusal unbalanced him. I'm surprised he didn't kill her Monday. Was there a quarrel? What does the servant say?"

"He is very loyal to Madame, sir. But after persuasion"—Chafik coughed discreetly— "he informed me his mistress sent him on an errand and told him not to hurry back. Therefore he did not see Lebrun."

Ellsworth said, "The husband was away, too. But obviously Lebrun went to the house in answer to the telephone call and received a final 'No.' He went off somewhere to brood. Came back last night—"

"Sir?"

"Damn these crimes of passion! I always feel sympathy for the poor ruddy murderer." The Chief Inspector thumbed tobacco into a pipe with a large bowl. "Lebrun was hanging around when Fadan went to the hospital. Went in and strangled the woman, as he had threatened in his letter."

Smoke from the Chief Inspector's pipe drifted across the desk, and Chafik daintily moved his chair. "The letter, like the fingerprints, disturbs me," he said in his precise English. "I am not happy."

"It's a clear case. We know Lebrun's motive, and the fingerprints prove his guilt."

"Fingerprints confuse me—"

"Dammit, Chafik! Bertillon's system is infallible—"

"Only God is infallible." The little man's dignity silenced the Chief Inspector. "But I do not doubt Bertillon. The fingerprints were those of Lebrun. We have both the right and left thumbs. The small finger of the right hand, and two other fingers of the left.

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All were exceptionally clear. And yet—"

Chafik's voice became thin. He spoke now as if thoughts were escaping on the wings of words.

"Why were both hands smeared by lipstick? Was not one hand enough to silence the lady's cries? And why the thumbprint?"

"You mean the one on the cheek?"

"It was as sharp as if rolled on. A signature of death. So the kings of Babylon put their triumphant seal to a warrant of execution. So does a flourish of drums conclude the arrogance of martial music." The little man heard himself and rose in confusion.

Ellsworth looked at him with amusement. "Don't weave a fowler's net and get yourself snared," he said. "The little mysteries will be cleared up when we catch Lebrun."

"I do not like mysteries, sir. There should be no doubt in one's mind when one touches the shoulder of the accused man."

Chafik put his hand to his mouth and sucked the blister raised by the cigarette burn in Dr. Fadan's study. It was on the point of bursting, and irritation made him forget his manners and his usual salaams when he left the Chief Inspector's office.

He stood for some time outside the door looking for a way out of the labyrinth of his mind.

At last he announced conversationally to the empty corridor, "I am very foolish. Lebrun strangled Naomi Fadan in an excess of passion. It is not an unusual murder—"

Suddenly he was aware of physical relief. The blister on his forefinger had burst. He examined it with satisfaction, but was disturbed by the untidiness of the dangling fragment of skin. Carefully he cut it away with the folding scissors in his pocket manicure set.

And suddenly a monstrous pattern took shape. He looked at the injured finger, at the piece of skin, and ran down the corridor to his room.

He said breathlessly to Sergeant Abdullah. "The fires of Hell have lighted the darkness!"

Taking the telephone, he dialed Dr. Fadan's number and spoke with the servant, then cradled the instrument. "Only the dead wife is there," he said. "The doctor is at Hinadi. He rides horses."

The tall sergeant made a soothing gesture. "He seeks relaxation, sir—"

"I can never relax," Inspector Chafik said bitterly. He held out his hands. The fragment of skin from the blister lay in the right palm. There was a crimson patch on the left forefinger. "What do you see, Abdullah?" he asked.

"Sir, I observe you have injured your finger. If you will permit me to apply a bandage—"

"The hurt is within me, Abdullah. Let us go to Hinadi."

Below the military barracks at Hinadi, a suburb of Baghdad, was

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an agricultural district irrigated by a loop of the Tigris. There were no big houses—only the settlements of the *fellahin*, mud hovels roofed with flattened gasoline cans. Beyond, the land merged with the wilderness of gray sand surrounding the city.

At the edge of the desert, and shaded by a few ragged date palms, were Dr. Fadan's stables. The approach was a narrow road ending in a high wall. The gate was open, and Inspector Chafik left his car and picked a dainty path across the yard.

A hut adjoined the stable building. A middle-aged man, whose coarse gown was molded by the wind to his sturdy body, stood on the flat roof of the hut, intently watching something in the distance. He turned when Chafik climbed the ladder and joined him.

The man said, "The master rides. He is out there." He pointed with a brown finger at a cloud of dust which rose sluggishly on the horizon. "Satan rides Satan," added the groom, and spat.

"You speak without respect," Chafik said sharply. "Was that why your master discharged you?"

The man gave a sullen look. "There is no justice," he muttered. "He sent me away for nothing. I, Hassan, who served him faithfully for many years. The Bedouin dog he took in my place—"

"You saw the new groom?"

"As a shrouded corpse carried to the grave." Hassan flung out his arm in the direction of the dust cloud. "Look!" he shouted.

The rider had turned and was streaking across the flats to the stables. The horse, unusually large for an Arab, pulled viciously against the snaffle. The powerful legs had the drive of pistons as the horse came into the yard at full gallop.

Hassan said, "God the Merciful! God the loving-kind—"

The frail man in the saddle twisted the reins with a giant's strength, turned the maddened horse, forced it to its haunches in the middle of the yard. When he let it rise, shivering but quiet, he struck it between the ears with clenched fist, and shouted, "Know your master, you devil!"

Chafik followed the groom down the ladder and said quietly to Fadan, "The hashish eater who flies with the eagles today crawls with the worms tomorrow."

The doctor looked down and his flush of triumph slowly faded. He said, "What?" in a distant voice, and dismounted, throwing the reins to Hassan. For a moment he covered his eyes and then turned wearily to the Inspector. "What brings you here? Has Lebrun been found?" he asked.

"I have come for information."

Chafik gestured toward the hut. They entered the single room, furnished with a broken chair, a native bed, a few straw mats.

Dr. Fadan said, "I have already given you all possible information."

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"I wish to know more about the groom who died."

"The groom? As I told you, he was an old man who had a heart ailment. His death was from natural causes and I issued the certificate accordingly. There is nothing to add."

Inspector Chafik broke the seal of a fresh packet of Ghazi cigarettes, selected one for the doctor, offered it with a bow. "Who were the corpse washers?" he asked.

"The corpse washers?"

"We of the Moslem faith bury our dead with minimum ritual. But the body is cleaned for the earth's embrace. Who washed and shrouded your groom?"

Fadan limped out of the light of the doorway before he answered, "I did it myself. I was obliged to stay here because of the horses, so I usefully employed my time preparing the poor old man. He had no relations or friends in Baghdad." His voice became shrill, complaining. "But you ask peculiar questions—"

"I ask another. Where were you when Madame telephoned Lebrun at the Semiramis Hotel on Monday evening?"

"I told you I was here—"

Chafik said, "The groom was the witness and the groom is dead. It would have been possible to return secretly to the house and overhear the conversation. And I remember the seclusion of the driveway to your house, how well screened it is by trees."

Fadan put his back to the rough wall. His hands were in his pockets and his dark eyes were fixed staring. He said, "Are you suggesting I waylaid my wife's lover when he called on her Monday night?"

"It is you who say he called on her," Chafik said in a soft voice.

"Do you think I killed him? Was it his ghost that came back last night and strangled Naomi? Have you forgotten the fingerprints?"

Chafik said, "It would disturb my excellent assistant, Corporal Yacoub, if I asked him to fingerprint a ghost. But he is very successful with corpses—"

Fadan whispered, "I hear you."

"Sometimes," continued the Inspector, "we take from the river a body so decomposed that there are technical reasons why identifying fingerprints cannot be taken in the usual way. Yacoub applies science." Chafik drew at his cigarette. "Yacoub removes the skin from the fingertips and fastens it to his own with a quick-drying cement. He then rolls not his own prints but those of the dead person."

Fadan whispered again, "I hear you."

"The subject is ghoulish. It did not enter my mind until a blister burst on my finger. Don't you think, Doctor, that your wife met death by very strange hands? Am I not justified in exhuming the remains of the poor old friendless

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Bedouin who died here of heart failure?"

The man against the wall moved suddenly. His hand, weighted with an automatic pistol, slipped from his pocket and swung upward.

"I confess to your ears because your tongue will soon be silent," Dr. Fadan said. There was no anger in his voice, only tiredness. "I struck down my wife's lover in the driveway on Monday night and brought the body here in my car. You have correctly summarized what followed. The guilty were justly punished."

Chafik looked steadily at the muzzle of the gun, at the finger crooked on the trigger. He said, "Before I make my salaams to the Recording Angel, permit me to say you do not know yourself. The man who rides a Satan on four legs and shouts with the joy of his victory does so to conquer his own physical inferiority. Your mind, like your leg, is crippled, Dr. Fadan. It was this complex, not justice, which drove you to double murder."

He saw the trigger finger tighten, the staring eyes dilate. Involuntarily he raised the puny shield of his hand.

Chafik was talking rapidly now. "And it was so unnecessary," he said. "Naomi was always faithful to you. She refused Lebrun's attentions. She rejected him as lover—"

"You lie!" Dr. Fadan said violently.

"My soul may soon stand before God. Can I lie now?" The little man watched the sweat stream down the quivering face of the murderer. "I could pity you if you had not planned so devilishly. You discharged the groom so you could install the body of Lebrun as groom. You arranged the operation as an alibi, reasoning correctly that a man who had just given life would not be suspected of taking it. My pity is for the sick who will be denied your healing hands which turned to murder."

"Faithful—" Fadan whispered.

"Lebrun's letters prove it," Chafik said.

He saw the gun waver. He saw the tortured eyes darken with horror. And the Inspector turned slowly and walked to the door. He could hear the horses neighing in the stables, and the clatter of Hassan's bucket.

"Do you remember Othello?" he said over his shoulder, and quoted quietly in English:

" *'I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee: no way but this,*
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.' "

Inspector Chafik went from the dark room into the sunlit yard. He put his hands behind his back and stood watching a kite hawk which hovered on the wind with ragged wings. The immense silent desert, arched by cloudless sky, conjured eternity.

When the shot came he turned and looked with compassion at the body fallen in the doorway. "May I be forgiven, but sometimes it is better this way," he said.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WILLIAM FAY**

TITLE: ***First Kill***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: George Heidig of the 16th Precinct

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Heidig had killed a holdup man, but one thing had its teeth in his conscience and it tormented him beyond endurance . . . a "cop story" with tremendous heart.*

THE MAN WHO HAD ATTEMPTED to hold up the liquor store had fallen forward when Heidig shot him and he was dead on the sidewalk in the sweet summer evening. He wore a lightweight suit, cream-toned and attractive, with the crease still fresh at the back of the pants. Cars were stopping along Eighth Avenue.

"You did it real nice and quick," the other detective said to George Heidig. "You made no mistakes."

"Thank you, Morris."

"You're two-thirds of a sergeant already," Morris said, not in envy, but in professional appraisal. It was the way the thing had happened. Morris, as the driver of the car, had of necessity taken ten or fifteen seconds longer getting to the scene. "You were very good, George."

"I was tremendous," Heidig said.

He was still taking deep breaths, looking down at the man he had shot. *About my own age,* Heidig thought; *thirty years old—thirty-one?* He didn't look like a thief or a punk. His leghorn hat, with a gay red ribbon around it, had rolled as far as the curb. He had reddish-brown hair that made him look Irish.

The lights from the liquor store kept the pavement so bright you could almost count the dead man's freckles. Heidig could not see his

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victim's face, but neither could he forget the one brief glimpse of it that had been stenciled in his mind. He could hear the sirens of two patrol cars, loud and insistent, almost here.

"His name was Harrigan," Morris Lerner said. "Gerald F. Harrigan, accordin' to a light-and-gas bill that he should have paid three months ago. Three twenty—the other number's smudged here—Columbus Avenue. That would be uptown. You all right?"

"I'm all right, Morris," Heidig said. "I hope I'm all right. I never killed a man before."

Now the crowd was very big, encircling the body that lay in the vivid light. The uniformed cops from the patrol cars established a circle of privacy.

Morris Lerner had picked up the small automatic and marked it, as routine required. There was nothing to do but wait for the specialists from Homicide. The bright gay hat of the dead man had been trampled.

"You want a cigarette?" Morris asked.

"Thanks," Heidig said.

He was steady enough. He hadn't been too scared through the whole episode. There was just this feeling that kept growing and getting bigger inside of him. It was half-past eleven then.

Heidig got home at ten minutes after one. A big breeze swept the apartment, raising the curtains like summer skirts, as though you were sailing up the Hudson on an excursion boat. It was a new apartment in a downtown municipal project. The space was right and the price was right: four and a half rooms, $77.50. You could look south to the Brooklyn Bridge or north beyond the United Nations Building.

Sheila had left a light on in the living room so he wouldn't slide on the rattan rug. The three kids were asleep, lightly covered, in the larger of the bedrooms, one window closed, because the breeze from the north could get muscular, even in July. Heidig heard the refrigerator click, then begin to hum in its easy way. *I'd like a beer*, he thought.

"George?" Sheila called.

He walked in, carrying his can of beer. She had snapped on the lamp at her side of the bed and was sitting up, resting on one arm, watching him, squinting and looking pretty, her hair in curlers. They hadn't had a real live argument in many weeks. Things were good with them.

Heidig sat down on the bed, holding the beer can in one hand, putting his face into the warm, soft groove of her neck and shoulder.

"Hello, Dutchman," Sheila said. "You and your beer." She held him close.

"Hello," Heidig said, very softly, his face still against her, but he didn't say, "Hello, Irish," in the usual way. There was a difference tonight. The word projected too easily the man on the sidewalk and

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his reddish hair and the clear Celtic freckles.

Heidig passed the beer to Sheila, who took one determined swallow. It was a kind of ritual they had. She said she never minded him smelling of go-to-bed beer if she had a little bit of it herself. He sat watching her.

"You very tired?" she said.

"Not so tired."

"What then?"

"We had a little action tonight—Morris and I."

She put her hands behind her head, straightening some of the pins he had disarranged, her full lips pale from a lack of rouge on them, her eyes watchful.

"Yes, George?"

"I killed a man," he said. "A stick-up on Eighth Avenue."

"Sweet, merciful Saviour," Shelia said. All the color was gone from her face. She moved instinctively closer. "It might have been you."

"It wasn't me. It was him. He looked like your brother Frank."

She watched him carefully, knowing the trouble was real. He had never come home like this before. "You want to talk about it, George?"

"I think so," Heidig said.

She got out of bed, and she looked very good in her nylon nightgown. Heidig thought, *I'll be dead when I don't notice that.* She put three cups of water in a small percolator; then she walked with it to the stove and turned on a burner.

"Excuse me," Sheila said, then went in and looked at the children, as though it were a necessary thing to do. She came back. "Go ahead and talk," she told him softly.

"This fellow was coming out of the liquor store," Heidig said. "He had some money in one hand—twelve lousy dollars, it turned out—and an automatic pistol in the other. I was very close to him when I shot him."

Sheila put three measured tablespoons of coffee in the top of the percolator. "You're a policeman," she said. "This man had a gun. Why is it complicated, George?"

"I can't exactly say," he told her. "Or if I do know how to say it, I don't want to—yet." *Did I give him enough of a chance?* Heidig wondered. *Would he have shot me if I hadn't got him?*

"Please, George."

"It's trying to remember things as they really were that has me all mixed up. Something happened in one second and I don't know yet if I was right or wrong. All I know is—and this is the strange part—I liked him."

Sheila stared at him. "But that's insane, isn't it? How can you like or dislike a man in one second?"

"You get an impression," Heidig said. "A guy is dead and you remember him—the expression on his face—and you like what you remember. I'm stuck with that. His name was Harrigan. He had a wife and two kids."

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"That's laying it on," Sheila said. "Anyone can have two kids. Did he love them the way that you love ours? Would he go out with a gun in his hand if he was what he should have been?"

"He had no criminal record, far as we know. I learned that much. He was a very tidy dresser; he'd make Morris or me look like a bum. And all he had on him was a light-and-gas bill, three months overdue. He had a silly grin on his face, like Frank sometimes, when Mabel finds out he's been drinkin'."

"Did you see his wife and children, George?"

"Oh, no! Somebody else checks that, then calls it in. That much is routine. The liquor store clerk was no help. He was old and too scared. There's just the one thing has its teeth in my conscience."

"Say what you want to say, George."

"I keep thinking he wouldn't have shot me," Heidig said slowly, almost recitatively. "That he'd have dropped the gun and the stinkin', petty-larceny twelve dollars on the sidewalk, if I'd waited. I keep thinking that perhaps I murdered him, and I'd feel like I stuck a knife in you and the kids and spat on God, if that was true."

"Stop it!" Sheila screamed.

So he stopped. She fell against him, and they held together, swaying, slowly rocking in intimate expression of things they felt but could not speak. Her eyes were wet against his face, and Heidig, who had never before been weak, was grateful to have it this way.

"I've got tomorrow off," he said. "I'll look around. I'll find out things."

"You're tormenting yourself, that's all; and you're imagining."

"I've got to know," he said.

"But you couldn't have done anything too wrong. Not you, George."

"I wonder," Heidig said.

It was almost noon and the sun had climbed like a hot balloon. There wasn't a breeze worth a sick man's sneeze on Columbus Avenue. The Harrigans lived in one of a group of flats above a vegetable market, a shoe repair shop, and a corner bar and grill. The smell of bananas was richer than perfume in the heat.

Heidig pushed a downstairs buzzer under a mail slot labeled HARRIGAN. There was no response. The downstairs door was open. Heidig walked up a flight and knocked on Apartment C. He waited. He tried the next apartment—B. No answer. Only A responded.

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you know the Harrigans?"

"I know them." She was a thin, tired woman in a house dress. There was captive sweat in the lines of her neck. She pushed her hair back, watching him. "Well?"

"I'm a policeman."

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"I can't help you. What was their business isn't mine."

She closed the door. Heidig was going to obstruct this action with his foot, but he did not. The time he was spending on his day off was his own. He didn't want a lot of shouting in the hall.

The information he had on the Harrigans was preliminary and brief. The widow had been notified at this address. She had two children and was employed in some capacity at a place called The Copper Door, on 63rd Street.

Heidig had a feeling a man's biography could best be rendered by neighbors who wanted to talk. And there were always enough of these.

He walked downstairs to the soiled street and the griddle heat of the day. The woman who had refused to speak with him was at her window, watching. *I'm an enemy already*, Heidig thought.

The vegetable man sat half asleep under a patched green awning. Heidig walked away from the strong smell of bananas, deciding to try the bar and grill. It said McBRIDE'S on the window.

"I'll have a glass of beer, please," Heidig said.

"Well, it's the right weather for it." The bartender filled an eight-ounce goblet. "There now."

It was a real nice glass of beer in nice surroundings, Heidig thought. McBride's, like a thousand saloons in modest neighborhoods, had the restful substantiality not otherwise available to a majority of its clients. It wasn't air-conditioned, but the fans turned effectively, almost silently under the spotless, corrugated, white-painted tin of the ceiling.

There were a half dozen men at the bar, two of them reading the morning papers. Most of them looked at Heidig without special interest, yet he knew that talk had been suspended. The bartender came back, carrying empty glasses. He was a man in his thirties, tall, proficient, cool-looking.

"Fill it again, sir?"

"I wouldn't mind," said Heidig, watching him. "You know a family next door—name of Harrigan?"

"Jerry?"

There were intimacy and feeling in the way the one word had been spoken. It controlled the moment. The total attention of each man present was involved. They all looked at Heidig. The bartender stared at his own hands, flat on the bar—studiously, as though he had never seen them before.

"Are you a cop?"

"That's right," Heidig said. "It's why I asked the question. I figured you might have known him."

"Know Jerry?" The bartender's smile was wistful. He turned to the others present. "Did we know the sweetest guy uptown?"

"Lay off the corn and the sirup," Heidig demanded. But the weight of despair was with him. It was like

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a gamble taken and lost. You couldn't alter what might be true by screaming aloud that it was barroom sentimentality. You couldn't whine like a child for a change of rules when you found what you feared you might find.

"You asked about a friend of mine," the bartender said. "I didn't ask you." He took Heidig's fifty-cent piece and rang up two beers on the register. "We're supposed to be happy because a cop shot Jerry dead?"

"I didn't say that." *Easy now*, he warned himself. "How long did you know Harrigan?"

"Six, seven months. He was from Massachusetts. He came down lookin' for a break. A helluva break he got—him with his talent."

"What do you mean 'talent'?"

"He was a streamlined Jackie Gleason," the bartender said. "Ask them. Ask anybody here that knew the guy. Laugh? . . . How about that, Phil?"

"I don't want to talk about it," said the man named Phil. "Not to the cops. Not to anybody. What's personal is personal. You mind?"

"That's up to you," Heidig said.

"Exactly, officer. It's up to me."

The man named Phil was bulbously large. He swamped the bar stool that supported him. His thighs made his capacious pair of khaki pants look tighter than bologna skins. The sweat worked through the weave of his T shirt. His heavy hands were eloquent. For a man who didn't wish to talk, he managed to say a lot.

"Do you play the piano, officer?"

"No," Heidig said.

"Or sing?" Phil said.

"Look, I'm not the one being questioned here."

"You asked us if Jerry Harrigan had talent, didn't you?"

Heidig's silence conceded that. He took another swallow of beer. It tasted less good than it had before. The heat of the day was rising. Heidig's head began to ache. The man named Phil controlled the stage.

"Jerry'd sit there at the piano—any night. You'd think his fingers were part of the keyboard. Name it, he would play it—sweet, hot, boogie, the Eyetalian mambo. Sing like his mother was a nightingale. Tell stories? Even a cop'd laugh, fall down in stitches when Harrigan cut loose. It's just that he never got a break. Know what I mean? Three months ago he came in second on a teevee talent contest. Everybody in this bar here saw the show. Jerry was robbed of first prize. Good times or bad, he'd wear that grin like it was painted on his face. Good times or—"

"All right, hold it," Heidig said.

"You don't like the way I tell it?"

"I get the idea. He was the sweetest kid since Little Boy Blue, but he carried a gun last night. He held up a liquor store. Why? Did he work for a living?"

"Show business. That's what we

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told you," Phil said. "Happy-go-lucky and quick with a buck. Is that a crime?"

"Who supported his kids?"

"Ask his ghost," said Phil, with a great sense of theater. He was a gifted, dangerous cornball, Phil, and Heidig suddenly hated him—almost as much as he was learning to hate himself. "Or ask the cop who shot him dead."

It hurt very much, and Heidig thought, *They're ahead of me.* He turned to the bartender then, hoping to change the trend of the evidence. "Did you know Harrigan's wife?"

"I'd see her around," the bartender said, "but she never came in here. A big straw blonde, she could knock down a wall. Jerry never talked about her. He never laid his troubles on the bar."

"She was no help to his career," Phil said.

Heidig didn't want to talk to him. He turned again to the bartender. "There's nobody at the apartment. Where would I find her? Where would I find the kids?"

"Try the old lady," he was advised.

"Whose old lady?"

"Jerry's mother-in-law. The name's Delaney. Around the corner. The first house, with the tailor in the basement."

Heidig walked out into the thumping glare. The sun was high enough to fry the streets and shrink the shade.

A truck, half stacked with kegs of beer, had parked outside McBride's place in a bus-stop area. The driver, awash with sweat, walked around to the side of the truck. Heidig knew him from other neighborhoods.

"I'll only be a few minutes, George."

"It's all right," Heidig said.

He pushed the downstairs button where it said DELANEY. The stairs were steep in the converted brownstone house. It was cool and dark and damp within the narrow stairwell.

"Mrs. Delaney?"

"Who is it?"

"I'm a policeman, Mrs. Delaney."

She stood in the open doorway, and you couldn't say that she was fat, because there wasn't enough of her. She was round, small-boned, erect. Her eyes were a blue that Heidig had never seen before, and they were very beautiful.

"Can I help you?"

He stepped inside. The inevitable summer dust danced in slanted sunlight that the shades could not exclude.

There were two kids standing near the window—small boys, anywhere from four to six. They wore nothing but shorts and sneakers, but they looked healthy, like boys at a summer camp. They kept watching him with such alert and

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friendly interest that Heidig was obliged to look away.

There was a small oak table in the center of the room, polished and clean. There was a worn rug on the floor and on the walls he could see the treasures of the respectable Irish poor—a *God Bless Our Home*, in lacy lettering, a picture of the Sacred Heart.

"Won't you sit down, officer?"

"The Sixteenth Precinct—West 47th Street," he said, avoiding any disclosure of his name. He sat down. "About last night," he said.

"Let's remember the children and not say what it wouldn't be right to say," Mrs. Delaney reminded him. She sat at the table.

"Yes, ma'am," Heidig said. "The fact is I'd like to talk with the children's mother—if that's possible."

Mrs. Delaney placed one hand on the table. "My daughter isn't here." She looked cautiously at the children, then leaned forward. "A stranger might think—he might imagine Mary didn't care much, not to be here at a time like this."

"He might, at that," said Heidig. "Anyone might." He took out a large, sodden handkerchief and wiped his face. "You mind if the children stepped into another room, Mrs. Delaney?"

"But there's only this room. This and the kitchen there."

"M'm'm," he said. "Well, could they step outside?"

She looked at him appealingly. "Into the street? With all the talk that's going on about what happened? With them not prepared yet for the things they'd hear?"

"Well, I see what you mean," he conceded. "Where is your daughter, Mrs. Delaney?"

"She went to her place of business." Mrs. Delaney, sitting amid her variety of pious pictures, did not seem comfortable with this subject. "She has a temporary position —sort of."

"Do you mean she's working at The Copper Door?"

"I think that's the name."

"Is it a saloon?" he asked.

"I've never been there," she said. "Only please don't get the wrong impression—about Mary, I mean."

The older of the children had approached the round oak table carefully, and now stood next to his grandmother.

"My father got hurt," the boy announced. "My father can sing and he can fight. He was on television once."

"Please, Jerry," Mrs. Delaney said.

It was too much for Heidig, who got up and walked to the door. The woman walked with him making no comment.

Heidig turned to her then and desperately asked, "What kind of a person was your son-in-law, Mrs. Delaney?"

Her pale face told him nothing, but her lips began to tremble. "Must you do this? Must you do it now?"

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Heidig walked slowly down the stairs to the street. The same big truck, with a diminished load of beer kegs, was leaving the bus-stop area. The significance of this had not yet registered with him.

He went into McBride's to look up the number of The Copper Door in the Manhattan directory. Every man in the place was watching him. He stared from face to accusing face, then understood; they had learned his identity. The man named Phil, with his affinity for the role, was impatiently ready to be the spokesman for the group.

"You never told us you were here to take a bow," Phil said. He raised a morning tabloid in his hand. "The same cop with his name in the paper."

"What about it?"

"The man of the week," Phil said with deliberate scorn. "The people's friend." The hammy stagecraft of the man was maddening. "It won't bring Jerry back to us, will it, officer?"

"Lay off it!" Heidig warned him.

The enormous man stepped closer. "You don't like it and we don't like it." Phil gestured grandly with his arms. "These were Jerry's friends. We don't none of us like it. We've seen trigger-happy cops before."

Heidig hit him then. He did it automatically, with reckless rage, in response to the soaring need within himself. He hit him cleanly, so that the big man staggered, falling back before he came at Heidig, roaring obscenely, his vast arms raised.

Heidig hit him a second time with measured impact, dropping the barroom champion to the barroom floor. No one challenged this action. They were motionless at the bar. The man named Phil looked up at Heidig from where he was sprawled. He remained there, with the stamp of defeat upon him.

God help me now ever if You're going to help me, Heidig prayed.

He didn't go directly to The Copper Door. He stood for a long while at the counter of a white-tiled orangeade and hot dog dispensary on a crowded corner of 63rd. The diluted, ten-cent fruit drink had grown lukewarm from the heat of his hand.

He was reflecting how, as a first-grade detective, he had displayed, in slugging Phil, the smooth, imperturbable intelligence of a graduate maniac. But the problem receded from his thoughts, yielding always to the greater one: *What kind of a man did I kill last night? Would Harrigan have fired at me?*

From where Heidig stood he had been able to watch the luncheon guests depart from The Copper Door. It was half-past two. Heidig crossed the street. There was, logically enough, a copper door set handsomely into a remodeled, clapboard Cape Cod kind of façade—something new for 63rd Street.

Heidig opened the door and

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stepped inside. It was air-conditioned, as advertised.

"May I check your hat, sir?"

"I'm not exactly a customer," Heidig said.

The slight girl stepped aside. There was a bar to the left and a dining area to the right. You descended three steps from the entranceway. There were hooked rugs on a dark-stained floor, a lot of copper pots hung high, a spread of candlelight. It looked tea-roomish and respectable.

A big girl, blonde as the straw around a bottle of wine, stood at the single table still occupied, and she was totaling a check. She walked to the cashier's desk and then returned with change to the table. Her customers got up to leave. Heidig walked toward her.

"Mrs. Harrigan?"

She had been watching him. Her gaze was level and appraising. Her hands rested only tentatively on the dishes and glasses she had gathered to one side.

The words of McBride's bartender, "she could knock down a wall," were sustained by her size, but not by the tiredness Heidig saw in her face. Her eyes were soft, and they were so inexpressibly sad he dared not look directly into them.

"I didn't want to break in while you were still working," Heidig said.

"You're the law, huh?" She began to pick up the things she had set aside. "Well, it's not your fault, and I don't disgrace too easily. They know me here." She cleared the table. "I'll be back."

Mrs. Harrigan walked well—her high hips rhythmic, but by no means on deliberate display. She returned in a moment, her hands behind her back, untying a doily-sized, frilly apron. She indicated a table near the door to the kitchen. There was a glass urn of coffee on a heater.

"Might as well sit here. A cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks," Heidig said; then he was sorry. His mouth was so dry he wanted to correct himself and say he would have the coffee, or anything else, and be grateful for it. "About your husband," he began, "I'm sorry."

"That's official, huh? From the department?"

"I said I was sorry, that's all. There's nothing wrong with someone saying he is sorry."

"Here, have the coffee, anyhow," she said. "You look like you need it. Are you new on the job or something?"

"No," he said, "I'm not new on the job." In his distress he tightened his fists and chewed his lips. He raised his eyes to meet her level glance. "I was on Eighth Avenue last night," he said. "Outside the liquor store."

It was as much as he could say. Mrs. Harrigan poured the coffee. She had a calm, easy way of doing things. She pressed the sugar toward

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him encouragingly. He looked at her now and his expression begged for her understanding.

"You were the one?" she said. "Is that what you're trying to say?"

Slowly, miserably, Heidig nodded.

"You poor, poor slob." She spoke almost tenderly.

"Then you don't hate me?"

"Why should I hate you? What's the percentage? Is that why you came here—just to tell me you were the one?"

"That and other things," he said. "That and how I keep remembering the way your husband looked. It's like I tried to tell my wife last night. She thought I was crazy, but I told her I liked his face."

"He was a good-lookin' guy," Mrs. Harrigan said. "I'll swear to anyone he was good-lookin'." She stirred the cup of black coffee in front of her, raised it, drained it, and put it down. "He had a nice smile, huh?"

Heidig stared at the top of the table. "I guess you know what I mean."

"I guess I do."

"I was in McBride's place today. You know—uptown? Next to where you live? They told me there what they thought of him. The bartender and a man named Phil. I kept trying to sell myself the proposition that they were laying it on, about the talents he had, and what a great guy he was. I had to come here."

"He had a smile like a light switch, Jerry had," Mary Harrigan said softly. "Turn it off and turn it on, whenever it was handy, and especially when he was scared. He made friends like a dog, wherever he went, and the only hand he bit was mine, when I stopped giving him money—when I threw him out!"

Heidig waited. There was no one else in the dining section. It was very still. The hat check girl was gone. You could barely hear the voices in the bar.

"The talents he had? Sure he could play a piano. He could sing a song. He must have been a sensation in McBride's. He used to tell the kids what a fighter he was; then later, when they were asleep, he'd prove it by lickin' me, as big as I am. He had a talent for everything except finding a job that might spoil his beautiful clothes."

Suddenly she raised her hands to her face, her shoulders shook. "God forgive me," she said, "I'm almost glad he's dead!"

He remained still. There was nothing he could say. The girl sobbed softly. Morris Lerner had come into the place and was standing near the hat check booth. The clock on a wall said it was ten minutes after three.

"You think I'm awful, don't you?" Mrs. Harrigan said. "A nice guy like you, a clean guy like you—to hear a woman say these things? Me, with two decent kids to raise?

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Do you think I *want* it to be true?"

"No, ma'am," he said.

"Then wish me luck."

He wished her luck and stood up. There seemed nothing more to say. He longed for his pockets to be fat with money, but that just didn't happen to honest cops. He pressed her hands and said, "You'll do all right. Your kids'll do all right."

And then he hurried out.

He walked with Morris in the heavy heat along the shaded side of Broadway. They were silent for a while, then Heidig said, "How did you discover The Copper Door?"

"Well, frankly, George," said Morris, "you were as hard to find as the City Hall. I went up to that address on Columbus Avenue because Sheila phoned and said she was worried. You punched a guy in a place called McBride's and they told me there you'd been to see a Mrs. Delaney. You can't beat the department's scientific methods, George. What did you learn about this Harrigan?"

"He was a bum."

"That makes you feel better?"

Heidig stopped on the sidewalk. "Morris, look; don't rub it in. Whether the guy was a bum or he was a saint, the thing I didn't mention to you last night was this: Did I fire too soon? Could I have given him more time?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," Morris said, looking at him strangely. "You could have given him time to take that automatic apart and reload it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Harrigan's gun jammed, George. I turned it in last night and I phoned for a report from Homicide this afternoon. You didn't fire too soon at all. You're lucky to be alive."

They walked slowly together in the summer afternoon. A little breeze came up from the south. It was a miserable breeze that hardly stirred the lazy dust of the day.

"I feel like I'm sailing up the Hudson," said Heidig expansively. "Come home and I'll open some beer."

NEXT MONTH . . .

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A penetrating study of The Beautiful Man, a bronzed and forever-young Apollo, a classically sculptured Adonis—with sidelights on the one city in the world where beautiful young men are a dime a dozen . . . and what happened when gorgeous Eric got too deeply involved with an illegal gambling club called The Spinning Wheel . . .

THE SPINNING WHEEL

by DAVID ALEXANDER

CAROLE HAD GONE INTO TOWN ON one of her compulsive shopping trips and Eric was all alone in the beach house. It was autumn and there was an off-shore wind from the Pacific, but the day was pleasantly warm and Eric wore only a pair of bright yellow swimming briefs. He slipped his carefully pedicured feet into clogs and paused for a moment in front of a full-length mirror to admire his bronzed and classically sculptured body before he left the house.

His clogs clattered with a drumbeat rhythm as he descended the steep wooden stairs that led from the top of the cliff to Jocelyn's private beach. *His* private beach now, he reflected. He paused at the foot of the stairs that made a geometrical Mondrian pattern on the seaward face of the cliff. He struck a pose, his straight, muscular legs spread wide, his hands on his hips, his head thrown back, his bright-gold hair ruffled by the breeze.

He gazed up at the beach house. It had been regarded as daringly modern when Jocelyn built it back in 1940. It was a product of one of the numerous architects who were apostles of Frank Lloyd Wright—a structure of stone and glass that seemed to be a part of the paleolithic rock from which it jutted out to sea, supported by thrusting wooden beams that grew out of the cliffside like tilted tree trunks.

The house was his, too—his beyond dispute now that the will had been probated—all his, like the mansion in Brentwood and the Jaguar and the Rolls-Royce and the Matisse and the Renoir and the stocks and bonds and the jewelry and that nice, crisp cash in the vaults of the Los Angeles Trust Company. Well over two million in all, he thought with satisfaction, not even counting the large cash payment from the company which had insured Valente's car. That sum alone would have been beyond his dreams of avarice in the days before he met and married Jocelyn.

The sea was rough today, whipped to frenzied restlessness by the stiff

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breeze that sang a rollicking song as it gusted in from a far horizon. The breakers were charging to the sandy beach like white-maned stallions with great arching necks. A quarter mile down-shore the surf broke on Dolphin Rocks with the hollow thunder of a cannonade.

It was no day for swimming but the mid-afternoon sun was bright and had a salty burn in it. Eric put a pair of dark glasses over his eyes and turned a deck chair to face the sun. He made himself comfortable in the chair, savoring the warmth of the sun and the wet bite of wind and a pleasant sense of aloneness in this world of sky and water and deep symphonic sound.

Ever since Valente's car had killed Jocelyn, Eric had been forced to resort to sunlamps to retain the tan that complemented his bright-gold hair and his violet eyes so perfectly. For weeks and months now, it seemed, he had spent most of his waking hours in stuffy offices with bankers and lawyers, or in gloomy courtrooms. Now it was all over—except for the showdown with Valente, which was bound to come soon.

Once Eric had been horribly and helplessly afraid of Valente, but now he did not fear even the showdown. In fact, he was looking forward to it with the tingling anticipation that a poker player feels when he holds four aces and his opponent is about to call his hand. His lips, as ripely formed as those of a pretty girl, curved over white teeth in a sardonic little smile as he thought of Valente's ludicrous consternation when the showdown finally came and Eric revealed the aces he was holding.

His private beach stretched almost as far as Dolphin Rocks in one direction and equally as far in the other, for Jocelyn had wanted privacy when she built her retreat beside the sea and she had had the money to afford it. She had owned a half mile of the Pacific shore, and now he owned it. This was a wild and primitive area, some forty miles from the city, and it could be reached only by an unimproved, rough road.

There were no other human beings within sight or hearing, and in his present mood Eric liked it that way. There was no use in being a darling of the gods unless you could reflect, in such solitude, on your great good fortune. He had purposely brought no servants when he and Carole had come down for a week of sun and sea after Jocelyn's estate had finally been settled and he had been awarded all of it—all except some minor bequests to her theatrical agent and her servants and to aging actors who had once appeared with her in supporting roles. Like Eric, Jocelyn had no living relatives. She had always said that was a special bond between them.

Oddly enough, Carole, who was a night-club dancer, was also a good

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cook and neat housekeeper, so he had needed no servants at the beach. He was glad, however, that Carole had grown restless and had decided to drive the Jag back to town for the day. She would return in time to cook his dinner. Meanwhile, he could bask here in his private domain, lord of all he surveyed, and exult in the good fortune that his fine body and his radiant good looks (and Valente's car, of course) had brought him.

Certainly he had earned everything he possessed, he thought. But one must think kindly of the dead, and in her way poor old Jocelyn had been a good sort, really, despite her constant nagging and her demanding nature. Eric glanced down at his flat brown belly and his long shapely legs with admiration. "My Golden Boy," Jocelyn had called him, and he'd rather liked such foolishness. He must teach Carole to be more demonstrative. He had no reason at all to doubt her utter devotion, of course, but she was a rather stupid child and a bit on the inarticulate side. Eric required the admiration of others. Their compliments reassured him.

He was only twenty-eight and he had no intention of ever growing older, now that he had a cushion of great wealth. It was not the years that made one old: it was the work and worry. Wealth and his natural health and his remarkable beauty would keep him young forever. His conviction that his life would be an eternal noon-time was something almost mystical. He had always felt that he was a being apart, a god-like creature who had nothing in common with the vulgar herd, although he had been brought up in an orphanage and had never had a bank account, even after he had married Jocelyn.

He looked out at the molten-metal sea and its horizons were limitless, like his own. He doubted he would remain in California for long. Hollywood had grown tawdry and cheap now that the ridiculous and craven little television people had taken over. The motion picture stars of Jocelyn's era had had their own brand of vulgarity, of course, but at least there had been a certain style and expansiveness about them that was now completely lacking. A smart penthouse in New York might fit him better than Jocelyn's rococo mansion. Or an apartment in Paris, perhaps. Hollywood had never really appreciated him.

He had hitchhiked his way to California when he was 19, sick to death of jerking sodas in a small midwestern town, disgusted with the fawning girls who gushed at him over their chocolate malts. He had been sublimely confident that his startling beauty would result in an immediate miracle for him in this tinsel town which put so high a value on the physical attributes of men and women.

In Hollywood, he found out, beautiful young men were a dime-a

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dozen. Exquisitely barbered Apollos wiped your windshield in gas stations and dazzling Adonises fried your hamburgers at lunch counters. Despite this, Eric had had his chance, for he was so perfectly proportioned, so strikingly handsome that he was noticed. He had had screen tests and TV tryouts. But always it had been the same story. Whenever he spoke—even a few words—they roared with laughter. The voice that came out of the young Greek god was as high-pitched and quavery as that of an adolescent girl.

There had been a dreary succession of menial jobs—doorman, usher, carhop, bellboy. Then Jocelyn Anders had discovered him and he had become her willing protégé. She had virtually forced him into a speaking part in one of the big-muscle epics—cheap-budget films based on the adventures of mythological heroes that had suddenly become box office. This one had featured half a dozen stalwart young men in loin cloths, several of whom had held the title of "Mr. America." Eric had had only a few lines, and even those had to be dubbed in. It was especially galling to him that the man who spoke his lines for the sound track was an undersized and repulsively ugly creature with a basso profundo voice.

That one role had ended Eric's movie career, but Jocelyn, who had been one of the great film stars of her time, still had considerable influence. She had wheedled parts for him in TV Westerns. Usually he just sat at a card table or stood at the bar of a cowtown saloon and said nothing—not a single word.

Her final effort in his behalf had been her most ambitious. She was the leading patron of one of the stylish "little theatre" groups and she had financed a production of Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" on the condition that Eric be cast in the role of Stanley Kowalski. The result, as everyone but Jocelyn and Eric had anticipated, had been a total disaster. The audience roared with laughter each time Eric opened his mouth. Jocelyn had been able to lure carpish old Jenny Harker, the dowager queen of Hollywood columnists, to the opening night. Jenny had compared Eric's performance to that of a cigar-store Indian whose voice is changing. She had suggested that Jocelyn hang her ornamental protégé on her Christmas tree instead of putting him on the stage.

Instead of hanging Eric on her Christmas tree, Jocelyn had married him. She was 49 at the time, Eric was 25. It was Jocelyn's fourth venture in matrimony. She had successively divorced a movie producer, a stock broker, and a cowboy actor.

At first the benefits of life with Jocelyn far outweighed the drawbacks so far as Eric was concerned. He had always felt that he deserved

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luxury and ease and adulation, and Jocelyn supplied all these needs.

But there were other aspects of life with a woman old enough to be his mother that were not so pleasant. He was, inevitably, called "Mr. Anders" and "Jocelyn's gigolo," but his prettily sun-bronzed hide was thick and he could shrug off the contempt in which he was generally held by telling himself that it was mere envy. Certain more intimate matters of the marital state proved more seriously irksome to him, and his attempts to avoid them were the cause of frequent quarrels with his wife. Eric was a self-worshipping Narcissus who was completely egocentered. Over the years very young and very beautiful women had thrown themselves at him, and they had been sorely disappointed when he finally succumbed. Eric's lovemaking was largely a gesture, something he regarded as a rather boring routine that was expected of him. He was completely unable to give any part of his beautiful self to another human being.

Small irritations plagued him even more. Jocelyn had been a starlet in the 1930's and a pinup girl with soldiers and sailors of World War II. As she neared fifty she was still a maturely beautiful woman, but like Eric she simply refused to admit that time could age her in any respect at all. She insisted on remaining the glamor girl whose photographs had once decorated the walls of barracks and wardrooms. Unlike more sensible actresses of her age, she turned down parts that required her to appear as an older woman.

Eric could bear up under her girlish affections, but he objected strenuously when she asked him to zip her into dresses she always had made too small for her thickening body. He disliked having to be on call whenever Jocelyn's hairdresser came to the house, so that he could approve her constantly changing hair-dos and hair tints. He resented reaching parties after the canapés had wilted because of Jocelyn's interminable rituals in front of her triple makeup mirror. And most of all, he loathed having to serve as her masseur because Jocelyn did not want to reveal the flabbiness of her ungirdled body to a professional who might gossip to her other clients.

Jocelyn gave Eric unlimited credit at the best tailors and haberdashers, but she kept him on a cash allowance that amounted to little more than the tips he had received in his bellhop days. She allowed him no individual bank or check account and would not permit him to carry any credit cards, which he could not obtain unless she applied for them in his behalf, since he had no financial references of his own. She was, of course, afraid that he would take up with a younger woman. Despite the malicious and widespread gossip to the effect that Eric, The Beautiful Man, had failed miserably to

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please his mistresses, women were still overwhelmed by his male beauty.

In the end, Eric took up with Carole—not because he was in love with her or even strongly attracted to her physically, but solely to spite Jocelyn and to avenge himself for the inconveniences she imposed on him. His affair with Carole was therefore rather pointless, since he took elaborate pains to conceal it from Jocelyn, but he drew some inner satisfaction from the knowledge that he was a faithless husband.

In a great many respects Carole was far and away the most agreeable woman Eric had ever known. She was naive, docile, and undemanding. She never nagged, and when he was in her company, she never complained if he lost himself completely in some private reverie of self-admiration. He was firmly convinced that he was the radiant sun of Carole's simple world, although she was far too artless to express such sentiments. He made love to her as if he were conferring a favor on her; and without allowing his own emotions to become deeply involved, he rather enjoyed their more intimate moments—for he was really making love to himself.

He had met Carole while she was dancing at Valente's club on the County Strip between Beverly Hills and Hollywood—a place called The Spinning Wheel. The name was daring—or contemptuous—since it did not refer to the antique spinning wheel that decorated the entrance, but to a spinning roulette wheel in the back room where illegal gambling was conducted.

Eric had not gone to the Spinning Wheel to drink. He drank moderately when he drank at all because he did not want his handsome face marred by dark circles under red-filamented eyes. He did not go to see the floor show, either, although he watched it for a while and was pleased to note that one of the pretty little dancers could not keep her eyes off him, even while she was performing. He went to The Spinning Wheel to gamble.

He had been exceptionally lucky that afternoon in betting the races at Santa Anita Park. On a hunch he had invested $2 in a daily double on horses named Shining Youth and Lovely Lad. Both won, and both had been extreme outsiders in the betting. The daily double had paid nearly $1000—more cash than Eric had ever had at one time in all his life.

Wild dreams of increasing it to a small fortune that would make him independent of Jocelyn came deliciously to his mind. He even framed pretty, condescending speeches, telling his wife how really fond of her he was, but how he must separate from her now because he had his own life to lead. He could imagine the look of utter desolation that would ravage her face. He could see her becoming suddenly old and horribly ugly right in front of

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his eyes—like the portrait of a female Dorian Gray—and he found the mere imagining of such an experience exquisitely exciting.

Eric was no great reader, but he was fond of the works of Oscar Wilde. He had memorized some of his wittier remarks to quote when Jocelyn's friends, who fancied themselves intellectuals, were around. He identified closely with Dorian Gray—up to the point where that unspeakably horrid thing happened to him. Eric was determined he would never suffer such a grisly fate himself.

He had been lucky that first night at Valente's club. He had almost doubled his race winnings and was in a generous and expansive mood. After he gambled, he watched the floor show and he asked the captain to invite the pretty young dancer who was so obviously smitten with him to his table for champagne.

That was how he had met Carole.

He was quite fond of her, really—as fond as he could be of anyone, despite the fact that she could never seem to find the words to express her adoration of him. He sensed the warmth of her devotion, however, and he treated her with kindness, though it was the off-hand, casual kindness he showed toward Jocelyn's ridiculous little Pekingese which squealed with delight every time she caught sight of him.

Eric's luck at Valente's tables had continued for awhile. And then he had begun to lose. Very soon he had lost all his winnings, and he began to scrape together what small sums he could by hoarding his penurious allowance and secretly selling jewelry Jocelyn had given him.

He lost that, too.

That was when Valente, who had been sure Jocelyn would pay Eric's debts, suggested he play on IOU's until his luck changed. But his luck had not changed—except to get worse.

Finally he owed thousands, and Valente cut off his credit. What was worse, Valente demanded immediate payment of the large sum he owed. He threatened to go to Jocelyn unless he was paid.

In a desperate attempt to forestall that, Eric sold the Porsche that Jocelyn had given him for Christmas, and brought her wrath down on his head. Still Valente was not satisfied. He demanded that Eric go to his wife and ask her to pay off the balance of his debt. Eric was frightened, and he promised, but he could not bring himself to go to Jocelyn who was already furious about the sale of the sports car.

So Valente sent two of his boys to remind Eric.

Eric took a terrible beating. Despite his size and youth and perfect physical condition, he did not attempt to defend himself. He covered his head with his arms, horribly afraid that his face would be scarred. He could endure the terrible, sickening pain of the blows, the stomp-

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ing feet that crushed him when he fell; but the thought of ugly, livid scars that he would bear for life, that he would have to see each time he looked into a mirror, caused him far more anguish than the beating itself.

And he *was* scarred, too, he thought, as he ran a finger over the tiny V-shaped welt beneath his jaw. It was a very small scar. It could hardly be seen at all unless he threw back his head. But he hated it and each time he saw it or thought of it, he hated Valente, too. After he shaved, he always covered the scar with makeup, blending cosmetics carefully to match his varying degrees of suntan.

Oh, Valente would pay for that scar, all right, when the showdown came!

They had taken him to Jocelyn after the beating, a bruised, bleeding wreck.

After that, she had paid her husband's gambling debt.

But Jocelyn always drove a hard bargain. She made Eric pay, too—every hour of every day. She reduced his already small allowance to exactly nothing. She doled out money to him a few dollars at a time, and he had to explain exactly what his needs were, like a child begging for the price of candy, before she would give him even that much.

She allowed him no life of his own at all. He became her secretary, her chauffeur, her lady's maid. She demanded ardors of him as a husband that he simply could not summon. And if he did not play his role to her satisfaction, she punished him in small and horrid ways. He began to fancy that he was the slave of some ancient, evil empress.

Eric had not said his prayers since his days in the orphan asylum back east. But now he began to pray fervently. He prayed each night that Jocelyn would die.

But Jocelyn showed no signs of dying. She was a remarkably healthy woman and she took excellent care of herself. She didn't even have to be careful about crossing streets. She simply didn't cross them. When she went somewhere, Eric drove her to the door. When she left, he picked her up at the door and drove her back again.

Then a terrifying thing occured, and Eric panicked completely.

Valente's gambling club was raided by the police and closed. Valente himself got off with a stiff fine and a suspended jail sentence. Eric was sure Valente would blame him for the raid—at least, he would blame Jocelyn and take it out on him. Valente must know that Jocelyn loathed him and wanted revenge, and that she had important friends in high places and that they had even more important friends in even higher places.

This time Valente's "boys" would not come at him with fists and feet. They would come with horrible sharp knives and vicious brass knuckles that would cut and rip

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and maim and leave his beautiful face and beautiful body a sickening mass of scar tissue. It would be exactly like the part of the story where the paint melted and peeled scabrously and the portrait of beautiful Dorian Gray dissolved to reveal a shockingly loathsome and revolting creature.

Wild schemes of escape came into Eric's mind. He thought of becoming a seaman under another name, shipping to a faraway port, and jumping ship on some tropical isle. He thought of robbing Jocelyn of cash and jewelry and running away to hide in Mexico where he had heard one could live cheaply. But he had no seaman's license and he did not know how to go about obtaining one, and Jocelyn kept her cash and jewelry locked up.

Finally he found a courage he did not know he possessed. He went to see Valente and tried to explain that he had not been involved in the raid on the gambling club. He begged Valente not to take violent measures for a fancied wrong.

Valente was quite sure that neither this pretty punk nor the silly old bag who kept him on a short leash had had anything to do with his misfortune. That had been strictly the act of a politician making muscles because of an election coming up. But the gambler was a professional, a man who always figured angles, and it wouldn't hurt to have someone who might have access to a lot of dough scared to death of him. Now that he'd lost his club, Valente was desperate for money.

His eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "*I* might believe you, cousin," he said, "but the Syndicate is something else again. The Syndicate is pretty upset about some stoolie fingering the club, and they've started a canary hunt to find out who was doing the singing. They'll get around to you, cousin, you can count on that. And when they do . . . "

Valente shook his head and looked at Eric pityingly.

"That muscle that looked you up before was nothing. They were just having some fun was all, roughing you up a little. But when the Syndicate boys move in, it's different. I don't know where they find boys like those. I'm a real tough little guy myself, but I don't want to be even in the same town with 'em if I can help it. If it's just a chill, they drop you in the ocean, and it's all over with, nice and clean. But in a case like yours, they usually leave you living, and that's what's bad."

Valente examined his nails.

"Real bad, cousin," Valente said glumly.

But can't you tell them?" Eric asked, his high-pitched voice rising to hysterical shrillness. "Can't you tell them I had nothing to do with it?"

Valente considered the matter. Presently he said, "I could, cousin. I could tell 'em that, and they'd

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believe me. But you'd have to show your appreciation. In advance. I trusted you once, remember?"

"But I haven't any money!" Eric protested. "And she won't give me a dime after what happened about my gambling in your place."

"You're her heir, aren't you?" "You got to get at least half under California law. And there must be a couple of million at least, according to what I hear."

"I get it all," Eric said miserably. "But there's nothing the matter with her. She's going to live forever."

An idea occurred to Valente. He admired his fingernails again before he spoke.

"Maybe she won't, cousin," he said. "It's a real scandal, the traffic accidents they have out here. Hundreds killed every year on the Freeway alone. Now you take that big limousine of mine. I been carrying two hundred and fifty grand liability insurance on it for years. I had to. A guy in the kind of business I was in don't want to have to go to law if he hits somebody accidentally, so he carries enough to settle out of court. I'm going to have to drop that insurance pretty soon. Maybe I'll even have to sell the limousine. But the insurance premium is all paid up for the next few weeks, anyhow. And if I should accidentally knock off somebody who's real big —like Jocelyn Anders, for instance —the insurance company wouldn't argue a bit about paying off the limit. They never argue about paying off the limit when it's somebody important."

Eric was shocked speechless. He had prayed for Jocelyn to die, but his prayers had never carried him this far.

Valente was saying, "You see how nice it is? You collect a couple of million for doing nothing—except testifying that I lost control of the car so they can't make any charges like vehicular homicide or manslaughter stick. It's easy enough to lose control of a car with all the power I got under the hood, and you'll get a two-million-dollar witness fee for testifying that's what happened. Then you collect the two hundred and fifty grand from the insurance company and you give it to me. And besides making you rich, I'll square you with the Syndicate."

Valente chuckled. "After all, I should have that much coming. I paid the premiums on that policy all these years. And a nice score like that could set me up again in Vegas or somewhere."

It happened the very next week.

They chose the unimproved road that ran beside Jocelyn's beach house because there was hardly ever any traffic on it and because Valente might logically choose that route to reach the house of a friend of his a few miles up the shore. Valente, a careful man, had even called the friend and made an appointment—to make his story stand up.

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Eric had taken Jocelyn's Pekingese across the road. He concealed himself in a grove of trees, held the small dog tightly in his arms, then called frantically, "Jocelyn! Come over here! Something's happened to poor Koko!"

Almost immediately something happened to poor Jocelyn.

She ran across the road. Valente had been waiting, his car parked just around the bend, the motor running. He roared down on her mercilessly.

Eric shuddered, just remembering. How simply horrible it had been! There had been no need at all for Valente to back up and run over her again. She was already quite dead.

Of course, when Eric came to his senses a long time later, he realized there had never been any reason for him to fear Valente or the Syndicate. He had gone to pieces like a foolish, frightened girl. The newspapers made it quite plain that the raid on Valente's club was only the opening move in a general crackdown on gambling that was politically motivated and had nothing at all to do with Eric or Jocelyn. The Syndicate wasn't looking for him.

Valente was now quite helpless. He no longer had his "boys" and he no longer had the money to hire new ones. There is nothing less useful to the Syndicate than a hoodlum who is in trouble with the cops. Valente was lucky they had just written him off instead of dropping him in the ocean.

In fact, Valente was completely powerless. He had run a bluff, but Eric was going to call his hand at the final showdown. Eric held all the cards now. Valente had lost everything when he lost The Spinning Wheel. Now he was just another little man . . .

Eric gazed out at the heaving water and tried to think of more pleasant things. New York might not be such a good idea after all. On second thought, Paris was much better. He would learn some French, engage a private instructor. He had had little formal education, but he was quick and bright. It shouldn't take him long to master French. He had picked up quite a bit of Spanish just by talking to old Maria, the Mexican woman who had been Jocelyn's housekeeper for so long.

He wouldn't take one of those stylish luxury apartments on the Right Bank like the ones he and Jocelyn had visited when they were in Paris on their honeymoon. The Left Bank would be far more suitable for a person of his tastes. Something a bit on the bohemian side—a huge picturesque studio, perhaps, with a skylight and windows overlooking a mushroom field of chimney pots.

And he must have a villa at St. Tropez. The New Wave movie crowd, the young ones, all went there. He might find their type more congenial. They called them "sex kittens," but he rather suspected

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they disliked vulgar emotional displays as much as he did. They were hard and bright. He thought he would like hard, bright people. He was like that himself.

He couldn't take poor stupid Carole along, of course. She would be terribly miscast among the hard, bright young people. She was more the quiet, sugary, all-American, girl-next-door type, despite the fact that she earned her living by dancing in a night club.

It would be easy enough to put Carole off—the same way he had put her off about marriage. He had felt lately that she expected him to marry her, which was quite obviously impossible. He had explained patiently how it wouldn't look well at all if he were married again so soon, with Jocelyn only a few months in her grave. And then he had revealed the arrangement he had made to assure her security even if he didn't marry her. Poor Carole had been almost tearfully grateful. She didn't seem to realize that such arrangements could be cancelled as easily as they were made, just as soon as he grew tired of her . . .

It couldn't have been a noise that interupted his reverie. He could hear nothing above the insistent sound of the sea. Yet he sensed an alien presence suddenly and looked up at the beach house.

On the highest platform of the stairs that made a Mondrian pattern on the cliffside a man was standing, looking down at him.

It was Valente.

Valente began to descend the wooden stairs unhurriedly.

For a second Eric sat upright in the deck chair. The pit of his stomach had tightened and he felt quite ill and he knew that he was afraid of Valente again.

He told himself there was nothing Valente could do. Valente was helpless—he was just another little man.

Eric lay back in his chair again and relaxed. He pretended not to notice the approaching figure, although he watched Valente out of the corner of his eye. As his visitor walked across the sands toward him, Eric took comfort in the fact that Valente was a small, slight man. Valente himself must have been conscious of his size in relation to Eric's magnificent body sprawled over the deck chair.

Valente had come for the showdown, of course. Eric had not expected it to happen here, but it was as good a place as any. He was fully in control of himself once more and was looking forward to the next few minutes. He told himself self-righteously that what he was about to do was fully justified, that it would help to avenge the murder of his wife.

Valente walked up close to Eric and said, "Hello, cousin. You look real comfortable."

Eric said, "You shouldn't have come here, you know."

"Why not?" Valente asked. "You

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and I have got a little business, cousin—unfinished business."

Eric yawned. "Our business was completed a long time ago," he said.

"Uh-uh, Not quite. There's a little matter of a two hundred and fifty grand—a cool quarter of a million, cousin. They tell me the insurance people have paid off."

"Oh, they paid," Eric said airily. "Thank you for your concern."

"So?"

"So I'm keeping all of it," Eric answered. "It will help pay the inheritance taxes."

Valente stood quite still. Eric took a piece of cleansing tissue from a beach bag. He wet the tissue with his tongue and wiped the makeup from the small scar beneath his jaw.

"You see that?" he asked. "You had that done to me. It made me dislike you, Valente. So I'm keeping all the insurance money."

"You're playing it dangerous, cousin," Valente said.

"I don't think so," Eric answered. "You're not much bigger than a jockey and I doubt you'd try to beat me up yourself. You haven't the money to hire others to do the job for you this time. And there's no use killing me. You wouldn't get the money, and you'd go to the electric chair. Not for my murder, maybe. For Jocelyn's."

Eric's long-lashed, violet eyes gazed up sweetly at Valente. "I've written out a full confession, you see, of just how Jocelyn died. It's sealed up in an envelope that will be opened in case of my death. Carole has the envelope in a safe-deposit box."

Eric put his hand to his mouth to stifle another yawn. "So what are you going to do about it, Valente?" he asked.

Valente's expression did not change. He moved to Eric and took a gun from his pocket.

He said, "I'll show you what I'm going to do about it, cousin."

He did it.

Valente stood rigid for a few moments, a listening animal. But he could hear nothing except the sound of surf, the squalling of gulls, the hushed voice of the wind.

Valente craned his neck, squinted his eyes against the sun, and peered in all directions. There was no movement except the sweep of sea birds, the tumult of water, the scurrying of wind-blown sand.

He looked down at the figure in the chair. Eric seemed very much the same as he had been a few moments before—except for the hole in his head.

Valente noted with satisfaction that he had held the gun close enough to leave powder burns. Poor chump, he thought, the undertaker can't cover up the scar on his pretty head.

Valente took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the gun carefully, even though he knew that a freshly oiled revolver with a cross-hatched grip was not likely to retain fingerprints. He held the gun in the handerchief and knelt down

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beside the body in the deck chair. Eric's arms dangled on each side, the tips of his fingers touching the sand.

Valente placed the forefinger of Eric's right hand in the trigger guard of the gun and closed the hand around the weapon. When rigor mortis set in, a small muscular spasm might cause the gun to slip out of Eric's hand but it would still look just right.

He rose, surveyed his handiwork critically, and nodded with approval. There was no possible way of tracing the gun to him. It was one of those weapons anyone could buy without a permit from a crooked pawnbroker. The cops always liked to find a suicide note, of course, but he couldn't manage that, and there was no use worrying over it. That business Eric had transacted with his lawyer a few days before might serve as evidence that he was planning suicide—because of his grief over his beloved wife's death, of course.

Valente grinned.

He looked back toward the cliff. The footprints he had made in the sand were almost completely erased by the wind, but it never hurt to take extra precautions. He removed his raw-silk sports jacket. He walked sideways across the beach, sweeping away the new indentations and the remnants of the old ones with his jacket as he walked. He scuffed his feet on each of the wooden steps as he ascended the cliffside stairs to make sure there would be no recognizable footprints and then he paused on the platform landings to sweep them with his jacket. At the top of the cliff a shaggy doormat was placed just outside the house. He wiped his feet carefully, shook the sand from his jacket, and put it on again.

He crossed a flagstone patio. He did not descend the gentle slope from the house to the old road. He skirted the road, proceeding through the shrubbery and trees that grew beside it. His car was parked in a clearing, behind a stand of Australian eucalyptus trees, just around a curve. It was almost the exact spot where he had been waiting for a woman to cross the road a few months before.

He stood behind the smooth pale trunk of a eucalyptus and looked left and right. There was no traffic on the road in either direction. He got into the car and drove off.

Valente wasn't using the limousine that killed Jocelyn Anders. He was driving a small car he had rented under an assumed name at an agency in downtown Los Angeles. He drove carefully and got to a Freeway as soon as possible. There is no better place of concealment than the sea of speeding cars on a Southern California Freeway.

In a little more than an hour Valente reached the rental agency and turned in the car. He took a bus to the street in Hollywood

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where he now lived in a furnished apartment.

Valente closed the door of his apartment, bolted it, and looked at his wrist watch that had diamond chips for numerals and was a relic of his prosperous days. It was almost five o'clock. He had timed it just right. Any minute now the phone would ring.

He took off his jacket and tossed it on a chair. He poured a shot of whiskey into a glass and drank it neat.

At exactly five the phone rang. Valente answered it.

A feminine voice said, "Hello, darling, this is me. Is everything all right?"

"Everything is six, two, and even," Valente replied. "Everything is perfect. You been with people, haven't you?"

"All afternoon. I'm still with them. I'm with Hazel and Enid and Charley and Pete. We're in the Knickerbocker bar now, having cocktails. I'm calling from a booth."

"Will they go back with you?" Valente asked.

"Uh-huh. We're leaving right away. We're going to have a cookout on the beach."

Valente was silent for a moment, thinking. Finally he said, "Listen, you're sure about that will, aren't you? No possible mistake?"

"I'm sure. I told you, darling. It was a big production with him. He took me to his lawyer's office and the lawyer showed me the will and even read it out loud to me. There's no mistake. I get everything."

"Okay, fine," Valente said. "You and your little playmates go on out there and find the body."

Valente chuckled.

"You know something, Carole baby?" he said. "You and I are going to have a real nice future."

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name of magazine	*Honor Roll stories*	*percentage*
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine	59	50.8%
The Saint Mystery Magazine	16	13.8%
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine	11	9.5%
Rogue	5	4.3%
Playboy	4	3.4%
Manhunt	3	2.6%
Saturday Evening Post	3	2.6%
Cosmopolitan	2	1.7%
Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine	2	1.7%
Monocle	2	1.7%
New Yorker	2	1.7%
This Week	2	1.7%
Argosy	1	.9%
Bridge World	1	.9%
Eros	1	.9%
Fantastic	1	.9%
McCall's	1	.9%

In 1962, EQMM's percentage of Honor Roll stories of the year was 43.6%. In 1963, it was 50.8%. In other words, slightly more than one-half of all the distinguished mystery stories published last year in American magazines appeared in EQMM; and this does not include the bonus of excellent reprints, both short stories and short novels, which EQMM offers every month.

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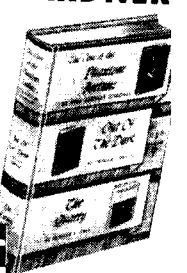

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